

The productivity of unemployment: emerging forms of work and life in urban South Africa

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Abstract

With two-thirds of South Africa's young people unemployed, mass joblessness is widely regarded as the country's most pressing socio-economic crisis. This thesis examines young men's everyday experiences of unemployment in South Africa. It challenges the dominant understanding of unemployment as a condition characterised by an absence – of income, something to do, or a place in society. Instead, this thesis offers an account of unemployment as an agentive and socially productive experience – punctuated by a multitude of actions, choices, and complex relations of inter-dependence. The findings of this thesis also challenge the assumption that unemployment is inevitably the result of a lack of jobs, showing instead that jobs at the bottom-end of the labour market are at times rejected in favor of alternative modes of socioeconomic life.

The thesis is based on twelve months of ethnographic research in Zandspruit, an informal settlement on the outskirts of northern Johannesburg. It offers a detailed account of the ways in which young men make a living outside of wage work. It argues that men's alternative economic practices are not a last resort, as is often presumed, but rather an active attempt to guard themselves against succumbing to precarious and insecure wage employment. The thesis reveals how young men's social position within the specific socio-spatial location of Zandspruit mediates their economic choices and work-related decisions while also reinforcing local inequalities. Finally, the thesis examines the wider social, existential, and political implications of such shifts in the historically close relationship between wage work and social order. The findings in this thesis confront a dominant discourse that propounds a 'crisis of masculinity' caused by unemployment. They do so by showcasing the diversity of ways young men negotiate their social obligations alongside the other demands in their lives.

By revealing the ways in which young men refuse wage work and socially, economically and politically navigate unemployment, this thesis contributes to current political and economic debates about (un)employment and inequality in South Africa – and beyond. In so doing, this thesis makes a case for re-thinking the normative centrality of work both in academic scholarship, and in our social policies and political visions of economic redress and emancipation.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own, unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Oxford. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any university.

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List of abbreviations

AIDS – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ANC – African National Congress
BMW – Bavarian Motor Works
CBD – Central Business District
COSATU – Congress of South African Trade Unions
CSG – Child Support Grant
CV – Curriculum Vitae
DA – Democratic Alliance
DP – Democratic Party
KFC – Kentucky Fried Chicken
MEC – Member of the Executive Council
MiWOrc – Migration for Work Research Consortium
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
NYDA – National Youth Development Agency
RDP – Reconstruction and Development Programme
R&B – Rhythm and Blues
SAFTU – South African Federation of Trade Unions
SAMWU – The South African Municipal Workers’ Union
SECC – Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee
StatsSA – Statistics South Africa
SPII – Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute
TVET – Technical and Vocational Education and Training
VW – Volkswagen
ZYF – Zandspruit Youth Forum

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction

While sitting on the street corner at the main pedestrian entrance to the informal settlement of Zandspruit, I struck up a conversation with a young man called Sizwe. ‘It’s hard to find yourself a nice life here’, he told me. I asked what he meant. ‘It’s not simple to survive’, he said, describing how young people like himself ‘have talent’ but do not know the ‘right people’ to get ahead. ‘If the government doesn’t provide and make sure that people get enough employment’, he continued, ‘nothing is going to work out’. Unemployment, he implied, is ‘why people end up in jail – getting years for nothing.’ Sizwe was twenty-seven years old and spent most of his time on that street corner with a group of friends in their mid-20s and early 30s. On a typical day the men gathered to gamble, drink, discuss politics, and endlessly scheme ways to make money. ‘I won’t say if I’m working or not’, Sizwe told me when I probed about his employment-status, ‘but I’m always busy doing lots of activities’.

Sizwe had worked two jobs in his life: a weekend job at a nearby garden nursery before dropping out of school; and as a private security guard for a luxury housing estate a few years later. He left both of these jobs within six months. When I asked about his decision to leave the security job, he told me, ‘I don’t want to work for security anymore. It’s too dangerous because you’re going to die for watching a house that’s not yours’. Working in the bottom-end of the urban labour market involved an intolerable

contradiction. Working as a security guard brought Sizwe face to face with obscene wealth, and the kinds of lives in the suburbs of Johannesburg his friends and he yearned for, while simultaneously trapping him in a job that offered him none of these prospects. Paradoxically, Sizwe experienced his incorporation within the formal economy not as a mode of inclusion but exclusion. As Sizwe explained to me, staying-in a low-paying job meant succumbing to defeat and resigning himself to a life at the bottom of the social heap. Like many other unemployed young men I met in Zandspruit, Sizwe did not spend his free time looking for work in the formal economy that brought large numbers of migrants (local and international) into the area. Instead, he spent his days strategizing how to make money to avoid these very jobs. While never forthcoming about his sources of income, over time I learned that Sizwe and his friends made money, among other things, from gambling, selling drugs, and criminal activity (including, ironically, burglaries of the very complexes he had previously been paid to protect). Young men like Sizwe saw making a livelihood in the street economy less as a last resort but rather as a way to keep despair and demoralisation at bay. Sizwe's refusal of low-level jobs was also an assertion of his expectation for a better life and a desire for social mobility.

By the narrow definition of unemployment Sizwe is not unemployed. He is what economists call a 'discouraged work seeker', someone who has given up looking for work. South Africa has an official unemployment rate of 26 per cent and an expanded unemployment rate of 35-40 per cent (StatsSA

2018).¹ Unemployment for young people is even higher. The official unemployment rate amongst people aged 15 to 34 is 66 per cent, with a large proportion of these youth having never worked before (StatsSA 2016). Youth account for over half (67%) of the nine million people who are without a job in South Africa (StatsSA 2016). The term ‘discouraged’ conjures up an image of someone no longer looking for employment because there are simply no jobs or jobs one does not qualify for. Neither of these scenarios make sense in the case of Sizwe. If there were no jobs the rate of migration into the area would be plummeting, but it is increasing daily. In fact, census data shows that one’s chance of finding a job in Zandspruit is 1.5 times higher than in South Africa as a whole (StatsSA 2011). Sizwe was not out of work because he could not find a job. Rather, he had chosen to stop looking for one and refused to take up ‘piece jobs’ (short term work often involving manual labour) and low-wage jobs in the nearby shopping malls and office parks. Sizwe is not alone. I met many young men in Zandspruit who complained about their exclusion from the mainstream economy, shared popular anxieties about the social consequences of unemployment, while simultaneously refusing to accept certain jobs or wages below a certain threshold. Others who did take jobs in fast food restaurants, as security guards, or in construction were not only hesitant to admit this but did so for short periods and often without much commitment.

¹ The official definition of unemployment counts only those who are actively seeking work, but do not have a job. Expanded unemployment rates include everyone without a job irrespective of whether they are actively seeking work or not. Even the expanded rates are likely to be underestimates, as in South Africa any moneymaking activity is considered to be employment on the strict definition.

This is very different from the usual picture economists paint of labour markets in the context of high unemployment, and a surprising inversion of South African common sense. It suggests that the world of the unemployed is not necessarily one of passivity, misery and disorientation. Nor is unemployment inevitably an imposed condition. It may in fact be a chosen pathway – albeit from a position of deep constraint. This opens up space for an alternative account of the unemployed that challenges the dominant narrative that unemployment is simply the function of a failing labour market. Such dynamics beg for a more complex and nuanced view of the conditions underlying people's economic choices. It also demands a conception of unemployment that is not defined as a deficit, or by the absence of activity or choice, but rather as a strategy, at least for some, involving activity and a measure of purpose and possibility.

The language of crisis is never far from a discussion on unemployment in South Africa. Public opinion in South Africa does not agree on much, but everyone agrees across ideological divides that unemployment is the country's most pressing socio-economic crisis. Unemployment is regarded not only as an economic issue but also a social and existential one. Both politicians and commentators portray young people excluded from work as inactive, aimless, and without hope. They worry that the consequences of this are devastating not only for individuals but communities and society as a whole, thus posing a 'threat' to social stability.

Speaking at the Gauteng provincial Economic Indaba in June 2016, the premier David Makhuru noted that growing youth unemployment was a ‘ticking time bomb’ and should be declared a ‘state of emergency’ (Kilian 2016). ‘Drugs are destroying the next generation of South African workers and leaders, and crime is destroying the fabric of the existing society, reversing the gains of democracy’, said Makhuru. In 2011, Zwelinzima Vavi, the then-general-secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU),² warned about the consequences of a growing proportion of youth excluded from the world of work. ‘This is a crisis’, he said. ‘If we look at lots of our cities, they are all surrounded by a ring of fire’ (Price 2012). At the other ideological extreme, Ann Bernstein, the director of a free-market think-tank, has called youth joblessness a ‘growing, generations-long crisis’. We have a situation, she notes, of almost 6 million youth without jobs who are ‘doing nothing and going nowhere’ (Bernstein 2017). Underlying this portrait of youth as a ‘ticking bomb’ is the presumption that those without jobs are on an inexorable trajectory towards political action and violence (Cramer 2010; Enria 2018; Kaplan 1994; Richards 1996; Urdal 2004). This crisis talk and the attendant moral condemnation of ‘idle youth’ is not new or unique to South Africa.

The official concern with ‘idle youth’ was prevalent among colonial regimes and during apartheid and frequently used to justify various control and disciplining measures (Barchiesi 2016a; F. Cooper 1987; Seekings and

² Zwelinzima Vavi is now the general secretary of the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU).

Nattrass 2005, 169–71). For example, the apartheid pass laws regulated black life and sought, often ineffectively, to tie urban residence to state-recognised employment. The pass laws were premised on forcing Africans into the labour force or forcing them out of cities. They used the labour contract as a means to separate black South Africans who were allowed in the city and those who were not. The intent of these laws was frequently tied to a concern with ‘idleness’, especially among unemployed township youth, and the underutilisation of urban labour which undermined the government’s urban labour preference policy (Posel 1991, 83,86). In 1962 the government’s Botha commission characterised those who refused to do arduous manual labour (and instead made money informally) as prone to parasitism, crime and idleness (Seekings and Nattrass 2005, 170). Joblessness in a historic and a continuing sense is thus constructed by the state as a social, moral – and potential political – threat.

The crisis narrative that surrounds contemporary discussions on youth unemployment has a tendency to present mass joblessness as a temporary aberration and a fairly recent occurrence. Yet, historical data shows that it was South Africa’s recession in the mid-1970s that marked a shift from labour shortages to mass unemployment (Seekings and Nattrass 2005, 166–77). This pattern continued into the post-apartheid period, with a quarter of the labour force consistently unemployed since the 1994 elections (Casale, Muller, and Posel 2005). This long history of unemployment and urban youths’ refusal to do low-wage jobs is habitually overlooked; it has been recognised by only a small group of anthropologists and social historians (J. Comaroff 1985; J. L. Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Glaser 1998; Hellmann 1940, 1948; M. Wilson and Mafeje 1963). The crisis narrative that

surrounds unemployment reinforces the idea that it is a ‘problem’ in need of solving rather than a structural condition or permanent feature of the South African landscape.

Janet Roitman (2013) has observed that all crisis based analyses begin with the same question: what went wrong? The danger of understanding unemployment as a ‘crisis’ is therefore linked to the way in which this framing presumes the present to be a departure from a preferred and seemingly more *normal* state of affairs (Roitman 2013). This idea of the ‘norm’ is particularly evident in the moralising discourses that surround discussions on youth unemployment. As Franco Barchiesi points out, these discourses have long viewed wage labour as the ‘image of social discipline’ and a technique of governance to regulate ‘uncivilised’ and ‘unruly’ African populations – especially youth and non-docile women (Barchiesi 2012b, 243). The framing of unemployment as a departure from a more normal state of affairs highlights the normative and ideological centrality of wage work to mainstream visions of social order and our conceptions of respectability and personal fulfilment (Barchiesi 2011; Weeks 2011). It does this despite the increasing unavailability and insecurity of wage work, making modes of socioeconomic life outside these conventional and normative categories both problematic and invisible in our analyses and policy prescriptions.

This thesis, based on ethnographic research conducted between 2011 and 2016 in Zandspruit informal settlement on the outskirts of northern Johannesburg, not only locates itself within a long tradition of urban

anthropology and social history, but also delves into these echoes of the past to shed light on the present. I will argue that to approach unemployment from the perspective of ‘crisis’ is to look for something that is not there – and miss much of what is. My point is that to understand unemployment negatively as something people are *not* doing or something people lack obscures what *is* there. The narrative of passivity, decline and despair that dominates discussions of unemployment tells us very little about the everyday lived realities of unemployed youth in a place like Zandspruit. These narratives also express a prejudice that ‘real’ work only happens in the formal economy, rendering other forms of work and life suspect from the outset. Moreover, I show how the dominant narrative of crisis (especially evident in the literature on ‘surplus populations’ and ‘precarity’) has a tendency to uncritically anchor the social order in waged employment. In so doing it discounts the significance and appeal of livelihoods outside of wage work (Callebert 2014; Denning 2010) and longer histories of resistance to wage work (Barchiesi 2012a; Bundy 1988; F. Cooper 1987; Glaser 2000).

Take Sizwe, with whom this chapter opened. While Sizwe was unemployed he was neither ‘inactive’ nor ‘discouraged’. One might even suggest he had chosen to be unemployed when the alternative was a badly paid job in the low-end of the labour market. Sizwe insisted that he was ‘busy’ and ‘working hard’ to achieve what he wanted in life. As one of Sizwe’s friends put it, ‘in reality you cannot just sit and do nothing... Around here there are lots of people running around doing their thing.’ ‘Some are playing dice [an informal gambling game] and living out of that’, he said. Others are ‘working at night’ – a term that refers to those who make their money

through criminal activity. Still others are ‘working in politics’. Moreover, he said, ‘some rely on their girlfriends or family [be]cause they’re working.’ It is clear that unemployment is not defined by inactivity. Nor is it characterised exclusively by despair and tribulation. This thesis argues that unemployment may be a sign (though not entirely or consistently) of relative privilege, choice, ambition, contestation, and expectation instead of deficiency or futility.

Here I follow the lead of Henrik Vigh (2008) who suggests we need to depart from our routine understanding of crisis and move towards an understanding of crisis as a ‘pervasive context’. What difference does this make? I suggest it provides a framework to grapple with unemployment not as a singular event or an exception but rather as a ‘frame of action’. In adopting this view, we can step outside the normative framework that dominates our analyses and shift our gaze from that which is absent (or divergent) from a recognised set of practices, meanings, and norms to an analysis of the everyday lived experience of those proclaimed unemployed. I therefore approach unemployment not as a deficiency but rather as a ‘social field’ (Jackson 2013, 7)³ from which people act and seek new order and meaning in their lives. Such an approach allows us to acknowledge the fragmentation, incoherence, and anxieties that accompany unemployment, while resisting a normative frame of reference. This opens up space for an

³ Michael Jackson (2013, 7) defines a social field as a ‘force field (*kraftfeld*), a constellation of both ideas and passions, moral norms and ethical dilemmas, the tried and true as well as the unprecedented, a field charged with vitality and animated by struggle’.

alternative account of the unemployed (as a category and subjectivity) and unemployment (as a labour condition) that is not defined negatively. In other words, a shift away from focusing on what is absent or missing to an analysis of the ways in which people seek new bearings and construct viable lives for themselves. Such a view allows us to study the social world as it *is* – and not only in relation to, or as an exception to, a social order premised on the normative ideal of waged work and the male breadwinner.

This surfaces questions that are otherwise obscured: if unemployment is not simply the absence of activity or inverse of having a job, then what is it? What new kinds of social relations, modes of existence, and configurations of meaning are produced in, or in response to, unemployment and precarious labouring? As will be clear in the chapters that follow, viewing unemployment as a ‘frame of action’ and ‘social field’ enables us to discern and illuminate the ‘provisional’ and ‘prospective’ dimension of people’s lives (Vigh 2008, 18, 20). Such a conceptualisation provides us with an analytical optic to disrupt and re-examine taken for granted assumptions, and explore how the forms and meanings of work, belonging and the future are being configured and re-configured.

This thesis thus sets out to answer a deceptively simple question: what is unemployment? I go about answering it by asking two further questions. First, how do the ‘unemployed’ make a living? What do they do to acquire money? And, second, what form do social relations, dependencies, obligations and aspirations take when not confined to the expectations and temporal and moral logics of a wage? I answer this question through an

analysis of survey and qualitative data collected among unemployed and precariously employed young men in Zandspruit informal settlement. In charting these young men's lives, decisions, struggles and trajectories I offer an account of unemployment not as 'social death' (Vigh 2006, 104), but rather as a different way of living. In doing so, I suggest that unemployment can be viewed as a productive experience in the sense that it is a condition and status that is shaped by the presence, *not* the absence, of choices and actions, one that requires a range of resources, capabilities and hard work.

To view unemployment as generative is not to suggest that unemployment is somehow a good thing, or that my interlocutors see it that way. In fact, many of the young men who were without or even avoided low-paid work were simultaneously frustrated by the failure of the capitalist economy to value them sufficiently, worried about the economic and social costs of unemployment, and shared concerns about crime and violence. By rethinking unemployment as a site of possibility and new orderings – and not only rupture, uncertainty, and fragmentation – my thesis showcases how the decline of wage work is engendering new and largely improvised identities, modes of belonging, forms of associational life, and political claims.

I use the word 'productive' in this thesis to move beyond an understanding of unemployment that is defined negatively but also to challenge the preconceptions and prejudices that shape the framing of unemployment as a 'problem' or a 'crisis'. It is important to make clear that I am not using the word productive in the economic sense as a measure of output or economic growth. Rather, my use of the term is indicative of a positive or productive

framing of unemployment to demonstrate that unemployment is not simply about being without a job or something to do nor is it inevitably the result of a lack of jobs. My use of the word productive is also an attempt to challenge the normative centrality of work in social policy debates and the existing social science scholarship. My use of the word productive should also not be conflated with the idea of productivism. In fact, by recognizing the ‘productivity of unemployment’ my aim is to purposefully, and perhaps paradoxically, challenge a ‘productivist’ frame of reference to help us to think ‘beyond the proper job’ (Ferguson and Li 2018).

Unemployment: a crisis of what?

The apocalyptic depictions of mass unemployment that dominate public opinion in South Africa and elsewhere are mirrored in the current scholarly meditations on the increasing unavailability and insecurity of wage employment. The dominant narrative is one of decline, expulsion, insecurity, precarity, fragmentation and disarray. In this section I track the orientations of recent scholarship with a focus on the key debates around the conceptualisation of un(der)employment. Echoing popular anxieties, this literature has tended to view the decline of wage work as a crisis of production and labour on the one hand, and a crisis of social relations and personhood on the other. I should note that this is not a comprehensive or exhaustive review of the literature. It is rather a sketch of the general contours of the literature that contend with the decline of wage labour and its implications. I do this by dissecting the dominant terms and categories scholars employ, and highlight what I see as a general presumption and impulse to view anything that deviates from (or exists outside) the norm of wage labour work as a negative.

This section is split into two parts. I begin with a review of the literature on the shifts in the form and nature of work (a crisis of production). This is followed by a discussion on the literature that tracks what these shifts in work mean for associated forms of social life (a crisis of social relations). In both, I trace the genealogy of key concepts and terms to critically assess the current scholarship's ability to come to grips with the everyday lives of so-called unemployed young men who are the subject of this thesis. This section is followed by an appraisal of the analytical tools that inspired how I set about this project, and provided me with the analytical tools to do so.

A crisis of production

Two concepts dominate the debates on shifting labour conditions: surplus populations and precarity. These concepts reflect two bodies of literature that have curiously developed alongside but somewhat independently of each other. I suspect that this is in part because they grapple with different empirical realities. The writings on surplus populations draw primarily on the reality of growing numbers of people in the Global South who are unlikely to ever find wage employment (Bremner 1994; Ferguson 2015; Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Li 2010; Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009). The debates on precarity, on the other hand, draw primarily on the experience of the Global North and trace the erosion of stable work conditions in an era of neoliberal labour (Berlant 2007; Millar 2017; Muehlebach and Nitzan 2012; Standing 2011). While the writings on surplus people emphasise exclusion *from* wage labour, the debates around precarity focus on the insecurity of those already incorporated (often casually or sporadically) *in* wage labour. The discussion below offers a brief discussion on the history of

these two concepts and an overview of the most salient features of the scholarly debates.

Surplus populations

Recent writings on surplus populations do not describe a situation of labour surpluses in the conventional sense attributed to Karl Marx, one of the earliest people to use the term. The situation in much of the Global South is not one where those unable to access wage labour consist of a reserve army of labour; or as James Ferguson recently put it, a ‘proletariat-in-waiting’ (Ferguson 2015, 92). The situation today is characterised by an increasing number of people with no possible guarantee of *ever* finding waged employment (Li 2010). Put another way: the ‘problem’ of surplus populations is not exploitation but rather that a growing number of people will never get the chance to be exploited by capital (Denning 2010, 79).

Scholars attribute the acceleration of surplus populations to increasing population growth, land dispossession, mechanisation, and the expansion of industrial agriculture (Li 2010). These processes are often viewed as a reflection of broader neoliberal reforms and what David Harvey (2007) has described as a system of ‘accumulation by dispossession’. In a similar vein, James Ferguson (2015: 151) has described the South African economy as a “snowball state in reverse” – rolling along nicely, but throwing people off (rather than picking them up) as it goes along.’ Despite the South African economy growing over the past two decades (though sluggishly and with intermittent set-backs and periods of contraction), this growth has failed to lead to any substantive reduction in unemployment: what is often referred

to as ‘jobless growth’ (Hull and James 2012, 4). It is vital to stress that the rise in ‘surplus populations’ in South Africa pre-dates the liberalisation and financialisation of the economy that occurred in the 1990s (Hull and James 2012). Rather, as noted earlier, mass unemployment has been systemic from as far back as the mid-1970s (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). In fact, the establishment of the Bantustans during apartheid, what have been called ‘rural slums’ (Murray 1987), were set up as a warehouse for a growing number of people whose labour the apartheid economy no longer required (Platzky and Walker 1985).

The urban slum is commonly presented as the embodiment of these growing surplus populations across the Global South (Breman 1994; Davis 2006). The sprawling shanty towns are in Mike Davis’s words the dumping ground for what he calls ‘surplus humanity’ (2006, 174–75). This formulation is nothing new but rather the latest iteration in a long genealogy. In the 1960s, Franz Fanon revived the Marxist term ‘lumpenproletariat’ to describe the growing urban populations who were forced off their land but not absorbed into the formal economy. A decade later, Keith Hart (1973) who first introduced the concept of the ‘informal sector’ shed further insight on the livelihoods of the urban poor. Hart, following Fanon, clarified that Africa’s growing urban population, while surplus to the requirements of capital, were not *unemployed* in the sense they were inactive. Instead, he illustrated the great multitude of ways those unable to *earn* an income *make* one.

The conversation has moved on from the 1970s. Today, in a context where labour is increasingly unavailable and informalised, the informal sector is

viewed less as a holding space for those excluded from, or marginal to, the capitalist economy and more as a permanent feature of it. Keith Hart has more recently suggested that informalisation has become so widespread that it no longer makes sense to refer to two distinct economies. While the tendency to view the informal sector as a temporary holding space on a teleological transition has been challenged, the dualistic logic of these earlier debates continues to linger in our analyses. This is especially the case in South Africa's academic and policy discourses on unemployment and poverty. For instance, the 'two economies' thesis promulgated by former President Thabo Mbeki in the early 2000s portrayed the poor as trapped in a 'second economy' structurally disconnected from the 'first' or mainstream economy (du Toit and Neves 2007). In more recent years, the Gauteng provincial government's Modernization and Revitalization Strategy that seeks to 'revitalise township economies' has slipped into a similar dualistic frame in its attempts to 'integrate the township economy into the mainstream economy' (Gauteng Province 2014, 9, 14). A similar logic exists in the idea of a South African 'underclass', as discussed by Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass, that takes access to wages as a fundamental divide in South Africa's economy and society (2005, 271–99).

One of the most persistent features of these policy and scholarly ideas is the habit of viewing livelihood practices in the *informal* sector as 'not-work' and thus synonymous with precariousness and abjection. Various chapters in this thesis demonstrate that this impulse has not disappeared despite new development paradigms that optimistically view the informal sector as a space of opportunity to turn the jobless into self-made entrepreneurs (Dolan and Rajak 2018).

Precarity

Precarity has become a buzzword in the social sciences. Its rise is undoubtedly a reflection of important shifts in the global economy. But what is meant by the term (alongside precariousness, precarious-work and the ‘precariat’) is generally not clearly spelled out. Consequently, I begin the discussion here with a truncated genealogy of the concept (see Millar (2017) for a superb account) to draw attention to the different uses of the term. My aim here is to trace the key points of debate and contestation that have arisen from scholars in the Global South. In doing so, I offer an evaluation and critique of the usefulness of the term (and that of ‘surplus populations’) to understand the economic lives and realities of young people in Zandspruit.

One of the first people to use the concept precarity was Pierre Bourdieu. Drawing upon his earlier writings in the 1960s on the unemployed and underemployed workers in Algeria, Bourdieu used the concept to describe the rise of informal and flexible work arrangements in Europe in the late 20th century (Millar 2017, 3–4). More recently, Guy Standing – the author of *The Precariat* – has popularised the concept. The term has become a kind of catch-all phrase to chronicle a shift from a world of stable, secure work to the fragile conditions of neoliberal labour. As discussed in the previous section, this is a process some scholars have termed ‘informalisation from above’ as opposed to ‘informalisation from below’ (Theron 2010). Accordingly, the word precarity or precariousness has become synonymous with short-term, casual, and insecure work. The people in these precarious jobs are alleged to make up a ‘dangerous class’ – what Guy Standing calls the ‘precariat’ (Standing 2011, 9). The problem with a conception of the

‘precariat’ who pose a threat to social and political stability is that it lumps together vastly different groups of people who experience precarity into one category (Millar 2017; Paret 2016; Scully 2016). This is reminiscent of the idea of a ‘lumpenproletariat’: a conceptual slippage the notions of ‘surplus populations’ and ‘superfluity’ also come close to.

The debates on precarity consistently contrast precarious work with an ideal of stable and secure full-time work (or ‘decent work’ in the lexicon of South Africa). Consequently, the discourse is one of decline and disappointment that interprets the present era as a negative departure from that which went before. The problem with this narrative of loss or decline is that the ideal of full-time, stable employment was never socially generalised and has always been more of a social and geographic exception (Ferguson 1999). Consequently, the term precarity presumes a temporal shift that might not have happened and thus risks romanticising the presumed security of Fordist economic conditions. Wage labour has arguably only ever been precarious for the majority of black workers in South Africa, long before the ‘dire contingencies of labor under neoliberalism’ (Barchiesi 2016b, 170; see also Bolt and Rajak 2016; Scully 2016).

The majority of black people under apartheid were restricted to the bottom end of the labour market with few pathways to skilled labour. While the colonial and apartheid administrators emphasised the ‘dignity of work’, the experience of work for most black workers was rather one of coercion, indignity, and disposability (Barchiesi 2016a). The situation is not that different in the post-apartheid economy, which has seen the rise of

casualised and flexible work arrangements (Kenny and Webster 1998; Paola and Pons-Vignon 2013). We not only have a problem of unemployment but one of working poverty where 54 per cent of full-time employees – 5.5 million workers – earn below the working-poor line of R4,125 (\$340) (Isaacs 2016; Rogan and Reynolds 2015). Some scholars have thus argued that work under capitalism might better be understood as inherently precarious because it stems, as Michael Denning (2010, 80) reminds us, from ‘the imperative to earn a living’ in the first place. This challenges the standard way of thinking about precarity that not only presumes things were better in the past but also takes wage labour to be intrinsically desirable.

Franco Barchiesi is not only one of the most vocal critics of Guy Standing’s work, his writing has also been prominent in drawing attention to a much longer genealogy of precariousness, especially in South Africa (Barchiesi 2016a, 2016b). Unlike Standing, Barchiesi does not primarily view precariousness as a labour condition or as a way to delineate a specific category of people. Instead, he views precariousness as a deeper ‘social and existential predicament’, based on the continued centrality of wage work to our social relations and desires despite its failure to secure the decent and dignified lives it promises (Barchiesi 2012c, 98). Put another way, the problem for Barchiesi is not that work is precarious but rather that wage work remains the basis of social value and the condition for inclusion, belonging and status despite wage labour being a diminishing reality for much of the world’s population. The significance of viewing precariousness in this wider sense – as an ontological as much as a labour condition – is that it allows us to appreciate the close, and tenacious, link between work and conceptions of identity, gender, and family.

A crisis of social relations

Scholars have long recognised the loss of work as more than an economic question but a profoundly social and existential one. A persistent theme in the literature that traces the changing economic conditions in the twenty-first century, often drawing upon the work of Harvey (1989) and Beck (1992), is the disintegration of social bonds and obligations (Standing 2011). This narrative of discontinuation and fragmentation is especially acute in the South African scholarship.

That unemployment is often tantamount to the fragmentation of the social fabric in South Africa reflects the intimate relationship, throughout the twentieth century, between wage labour and a social order premised on male-earning and male-led house-holding (Hunter 2010; Moodie 1994). James Ferguson, drawing on his work in Southern Africa, is one of the most recent contributors to these debates. In his account, mass joblessness (what he describes as a shift from a people-scarce social system to a people-surplus one) has extricated increasing numbers of people, especially men, not only from the world of work but from a web of social ties and relations that have long been constituted by men's capacity to earn wages. The consequence of this expulsion in Ferguson's terms is the propagation of so-called 'unclaimed' men who are rendered useless (2015, 151). This is seen to have profound consequences for individual persons and society at large – what Ferguson describes as a crisis of 'male personhood' and 'dependence'. He suggests this is especially evident in the observable 'fragmentation' of families and the dissolution of the notion of the 'male headed household' – the fallout of which is a 'grim' and 'terrifying predicament' (2015, 152).

While there is no doubt that unemployment has steadily increased over the past four decades; it is also the case that concerns over the dissolution of the family and a gender and age hierarchy premised on male breadwinning are far from new. In fact, scholars writing as far back as the 1930s record similar anxieties about ‘absconding men’, ‘non-docile women’ and ‘wayward youth’ (Hellmann 1940, 1948; Posel 2006; M. Wilson and Mafeje 1963).

The narrative of disorientation and disintegration is especially evident in two bodies of scholarship, both relevant to this project. The first is the burgeoning literature on ‘youth’ and contested transitions to adulthood. The second is a growing literature on ‘men and masculinities’ in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. Considering these literatures together reveals the resilience of the idea of the male ‘provider’ despite observable reconfigurations in domestic life, and the consistent portrayal of men as deficient.

Deferred adulthood

A recurring theme in the youth scholarship is the relationship between growing unemployment and the failure of young people to attain the normative markers of social adulthood (Cole 2004; Durham 2000; Hansen 2005; Vigh 2006). In much of this work, unemployment has come to symbolise a generation of young people in crisis. Youth are characterised as being in a state of ‘limbo’ (Masquelier 2013); a condition of ‘waithood’ (Honwana 2012, 3); or even ‘social death’ (Vigh 2006, 104). The larger point is that youth are prevented from attaining the conditions of social adulthood, and thus lack agency and control of their desired futures. In

many parts of Africa, being recognised as an adult man involves economic independence, marriage, building a home of one's own, and financial support for one's family (Archambault 2013; Hansen 2005; Mains 2012). From this perspective, the failure of men to pay bridewealth, the decrease in marriage rates, and the rise of solo and female-headed households is seen as evidence of growing numbers of youth, and especially men, being trapped in a condition of non-adult. Scholars have come to challenge the totalising and highly-gendered undercurrents of this literature that paint a picture of youth indiscriminately and indefinitely deprived of agency and personal maturation (Di Nunzio 2015; J. L. Jones 2009, 2010; Mains 2012).

More recent studies point out that unemployment is in fact not viable for most African youth in the face of economic difficulty. Instead, youth are seen to carve out new economic opportunities for themselves outside of formal employment (Di Nunzio 2012; J. L. Jones 2010; Mains 2012). Moreover, these scholars pay close attention to the provisional dimension of youth's life projects and social relations (E. Cooper and Pratten 2015). Paying attention to the indeterminacy of social life allows us to see that youth are not entirely excluded from their social relations and ties but are instead, as we will see in Chapter Five, actively negotiating their social relationships according to long lasting ideals and new provisional norms (Langevang 2008; Masquelier 2013). Nonetheless, the image of jobless youth in a protracted period of suspension persists, both in the scholarly literature and in policy debates. It is important to note that in many of these studies, youth stands in for young men, with Cole (2004) and Johnson-Hanks (2002) notable exceptions. In that sense, the failure to reach social adulthood is very often equivalent to the failure of men to live up to the

ideals of masculinity. A consequence, whether intentioned or not, of this literature is the anchoring of the social order in the capacity of men to be wage earners. As Jeremy Jones (2009, 3) points out, this body of work tends to view anything that deviates from the normative model premised on male work and male-led house-holding as constituting a 'crisis'. This viewpoint is also prevalent in the literature on men and masculinities.

Failing men

There is a popular consensus that the decline of wage work in South Africa has resulted in, and fuelled, a so-called 'crisis of masculinity'. The literature has a tendency to depict men in simplistic and stereotypical terms as either 'failing' to fulfil their social role as breadwinners or as 'irresponsible' with respect to their social obligations as men and fathers.

Echoing the youth literature, the research on men and masculinities depicts a common scenario of the collapse of marriage and independent household formation (Hunter 2010; Morrell 2001; Morrell et al. 2013) and the fragility of social relations and associations (Bähre 2007; Harper and Seekings 2010; Seekings 2008). Many authors concur that the decline of work has led to a crisis of 'intergenerational ties' (White 2011) and increasing generational and gendered conflict (Fakier and Cock 2009; Mosoetsa 2011). A number of studies show that increasing numbers of children live with their mothers or maternal kin, and have little contact with their fathers or paternal kin (Bray et al. 2010). Consequently, men are viewed with heightened 'suspicion' for having little to offer financially and absconding from their domestic and paternal responsibilities (Dubbeld

2013, 203). Unemployment and economic difficulties are seen to be major contributing factors to what Jeremy Seekings has called a ‘crisis of paternal responsibility’ (Seekings 2008, 21; see also: Bray et al. 2010; Hunter 2006; Morrell and Richter 2006)

In a similar vein, scholars suggest that diminished employment prospects have fuelled male anxieties and resentment giving rise to ‘violent masculinities’ (Campbell 1992; Wood and Jewkes 2001). In these accounts the inability of men to meet the masculine ideal of the provider is seen to result in them seeking status through sexual conquest and violence against women (Groes-Green 2009; Mosoetsa 2011; Silberschmidt 2001). While it is true women and children are often the victims of male rage, it is impossible to ignore that these depictions of men are crude and one-dimensional. More recent research has come to challenge the widespread negative image of men as deficient and untrustworthy by encouraging an approach to studying masculinities in the plural (Gutmann 2007; Inhorn and Wentzell 2011; Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, and Mphaka 2013; Morrell and Richter 2006; Morrell et al. 2013; Smith 2018). Yet, despite a shift towards seeing masculinities and manhood as situational and relational processes rather than fixed entities; the perception of men as violent and irresponsible remains dominant.

(Un)employment and social (dis)order

The literature on youth and masculinities in Africa is unambiguous about the connection between unemployment and social dissolution. Despite a number of these studies attempting to avert these normative impulses, the

image of the young unemployed man as ‘stuck’ or ‘failing’ has been stubborn in academic scholarship, policy debates and in the public discourse. The underlying assumption in all these accounts is a vision of the social order intimately linked to the stability of the male wage; the implications of which are troubling.

Jeremy Jones (2009), writing about young people in Zimbabwe is, like me, concerned about the normative baggage of much of this scholarship. In an excellent article, Jones argues that much of the youth scholarship (to which I would also add the masculinities literature) considers people’s views on what constitutes social adulthood (or masculinity) as ‘statements of fact rather than as statements *about* facts’ (Jones 2009, 3, emphasis in original). Jones suggests the result of this is a narrative that can be nothing other than nostalgic. In fact, various scholars writing about South Africa have noted a nostalgic yearning for the era of the male (often migrant) wage earner and its associated forms of social life (Barchiesi 2008, 137; Ferguson 2013; Sefalafala 2017; White 2012). It is important to note that most of these studies reflect the views of older, black (and often more rural) men. The voices and perspectives of black women (and to a lesser extent younger, black urban men) are neglected. My concern here is about how our assumptions about what constitutes the social order shapes the kinds of questions we ask, the terms we employ, and ultimately the analyses we generate as scholars (Jones, 2009).

One of the risks of (male) work continuing to anchor our scholarly analyses is the presumption that wage labour and the patriarchal order were more

fixed and had greater legitimacy in the past than might have been the case. The consequence of this can also be seen in a body of work that tells us a great deal about what social bonds and dependencies are fragmenting or dissolving in the absence of (wage) work but very little about the ones young men *do* have, maintain and seek to establish, however fragile. Many of the studies noted earlier, for example, often assume, somewhat simplistically, that men want to be the ‘breadwinner’ and all that stands in the way of them doing so is earning a wage. The chapters that follow demonstrate that young men’s relationships with their kin, girlfriends, lovers, peers, and children are far more contested, ambiguous (Bähre 2007) and provisional (E. Cooper and Pratten 2015; J. L. Jones 2009; Simone 2005) than much of the literature on ‘waiting’ or ‘failing’ apprehends.

In search of new approaches: shifting from labour to distribution and exchange

A process of ‘simultaneous monetisation, de-agrarianisation and de-industrialisation’ (du Toit and Neves 2007, 145) has highlighted the inadequacies of many of our older concepts and approaches to understanding the economic realities of people in a place like South Africa. It is these same realities that have provoked scholars to think in fresh ways – giving rise to new terms and conceptualisations that help us grasp economic and social life on the continent. Anthropologists, with a long track record of confronting dominant framings of the economy, have been at the forefront of calls to bring our analyses of the economy back to the everyday social actions of specific people in specific places. An approach rooted in a simple question: what are people doing?

The search for new approaches is especially evident in the work of Andries du Toit, David Neves, James Ferguson, Jane Guyer, and Keith Hart – all longstanding observers of the changing conditions of economic and social life in Africa. Each of these scholars provides us with novel terms and concepts to think with that open new angles and avenues for analysis. It is not possible here to recount even the most general contours of these scholars' work. Instead, I draw attention to two shared sensibilities that have inspired and guided the genesis of my own thinking. The first insists we collapse the persistent binaries and dualistic assumptions that still plague our analyses of the economy. The second, in part a result of the first, is an emphasis on the centrality of social relations and exchange to the workings of the economy and ordinary people's livelihood projects. These scholars question the value of neat theoretical frameworks and instead place the messy realities of ordinary people's lives – in all their heterogeneity and variation – as the ground to better understand the economy. Inspired by this approach, I now discuss these commonalities in turn.

Despite economic realities and modes of provisioning that belie any simple categorisation or dichotomy, dualist assumptions have often remained intact. This tendency is particularly pronounced in South Africa. One possible explanation for this is the penetration and extent of the 'formal' logics of capitalism and a centralised state in South Africa, compared to the rest of the continent (Guyer 2014; Hull and James 2012). Against this backdrop, Jane Guyer's original and insightful book *Marginal Gains* (2004) is especially instructive. Guyer challenges both neoclassical and substantive

approaches to studying economic life and asks us to transcend the dualisms that posit self-interest against solidarity; the formal against the informal; and the 'market' against the 'gift'. Rather, Guyer shows how 'popular economies' are not bound by a single logic but involve the entanglement of different logics, but not in a dichotomous fashion. This is particularly evident in her discussion on the interface between processes of formalisation and informalisation. Guyer points out that formalisation does not take a singular form but is rather 'piecemeal' producing a plurality of forms and conditions (Guyer 2014, 157).

What do we gain from resisting duality and embracing plurality? It allows us to appreciate that the *informal* (as with *unemployment*) is not void of forms, norms, social rules and meanings but rather takes on specific forms and involves a series of actions and operations. Such an approach opens up the intellectual terrain to explore the ways in which processes of formalisation and informalisation work together to produce particular urban forms, economies, and socialities (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008, 9). This is especially important when the line between work and non-work is, as we will see in later chapters, grey and partly defined by a person's circumstances, perceptions and aspirations. Moreover, the so-called formal and informal economy are inter-dependent with research showing how 'informal employment tends to grow in tandem with the formal sector, rather than as a fallback security net' (Altman 2013, 205; Neves and du Toit 2012). Attention to the dynamic interactions between economic activities and sectors allows us to approach and study the economy as a differentiated *whole* rather than as existing in two separate worlds (Callebert 2014; du Toit and Neves 2007). A methodological question arises: how does one go about

this kind of exploration? One avenue lies in the second dimension I suggest these new approaches have in common: an insistence on the indispensability of sociality to the economy (du Toit and Neves 2007; Neves and du Toit 2012).

With fewer and fewer people relying on wage work, scholars have been drawing greater attention to the centrality of social relations to the economy as a whole and to people's individual livelihoods. James Ferguson (2013, 2015) has been at the forefront of the revival of this discussion. In a Maussian vein – Ferguson has reminded us of the significance of processes of distribution and exchange that have been side-lined in discussions on production. In his latest book – *Give a Man a Fish* – Ferguson (2015) offers us an original way to think about the plethora of economic activities and strategies people marginal to wage work use to get by. He proposes viewing everything from the 'survivalist activities' we typically associate with the informal sector to kin and peer-based sharing, patronage, and relations of dependence on others (such as NGOs) as attempts or actions to secure 'distributive outcomes' (2015, 94). His point is not that these distributive practices are somehow new but rather that they have taken on new amplitude in a context of mass joblessness. He coins the term 'distributive labour' to mess with the persistent dichotomy between productive and non-productive work. He does this by drawing attention to the social labour involved in cultivating and maintaining social relations. As such, dependence is not so much a passive condition but rather one involving a particular kind of labour (Ferguson 2015, 97).

In my view, the benefit of an approach that focuses on distributive practices is its ability to make visible the social processes involved in people's economic activities that often defy our dualist categories (formal/informal; waged/unwaged; employed/unemployed). It is also useful because it highlights (although Ferguson never makes this point explicitly) that even those excluded from wage work still require money to participate in the economy. Put another way: the unemployed are not excluded from the world of monetary exchange but intricately bound up in it. The question is how?

Keith Hart (2017, 7) reminds us that money is not only essential for human potential but the main conduit for making social relations. If money is constitutive of social relations (Parry and Bloch 1989; Zelizer 1994) then the need to obtain money is vital to those included and excluded from the world of (wage) work. Consequently, any sharp division between the 'market' and 'society' is futile. One of the other things that strikes me as valuable from both Ferguson and Hart's attempts to re-centre distribution and exchange is the recognition (as feminist scholars have long argued) that capitalism requires, or rather depends upon, social relations based on mutual exchange (Fraser 2016). Or, as Michael Denning (2010, 81) reminds us, the unwaged work we do to reproduce ourselves has, and always will, come before the labour/capital relation. Here we see that an analytical focus on sociality and distribution (as opposed to production) allows us to view society in its totality where processes of production, distribution, and consumption are not entirely separate domains but enmeshed within specific time and place-bound relational configurations and circuits of exchange. This perspective confronts the dominant idea of unemployment as a negation and rather

opens up an ethnographic enquiry that asks: what are people doing to acquire money? How is money circulated and redistributed? These questions take us to the heart of people's social networks, interactions, connections and dependencies.

While I agree with scholars calling for a return to the study of the 'human economy', the challenge, as noted by Keith Hart, is to 'build bridges between personal experience and the implacable forces of the wider society' (2017, 12). This thesis privileges the domain of everyday practice (De Certeau 1984) while at the same time situating human action and decision-making within the macro-historical forces outside any one individual subjects control. This offers a segue into questions about agency, and how to conceptualise it, and the challenge of combining a political economy (structural) and cultural economy (subjective) perspective. The recent revival of the concept of 'moral economy' in the social sciences, particularly in anthropology, provides a useful framework to navigate the dialectic between these two poles.

Moral economies: conceptualising agency in the context of macro-economic forces

How do we account for the larger structural forces and normative regulations that provide the parameters for people's actions while also taking seriously the ways in which human action mediates the world? The relationship between structure and agency is not only a theoretical dilemma faced by the ethnographer but, as Michael Jackson reminds us, is at the heart of what it means to be human. 'Our humanness', Jackson (2005, xi) writes,

‘is the outcome of a dynamic relationship between circumstances over which we have little control [...] and our capacity to live those circumstances in a variety of ways.’ To view the human condition in such terms involves resisting a substantialist perspective that reduces people to categories or static conditions grounded in either subjective or objective realities. It is for this reason I have found the theoretical framework of ‘practice theory’ particularly useful (Ortner 1984). It views human existence as fundamentally relational and human action as neither the outcome of rational choice nor the following of cultural scripts. Rather, it acknowledges the role that structures play in constraining or limiting human action while at the same time allowing us to view such actors as having agency: to experiment, resist, improvise, manipulate, or consent to the structures they operate within.

Questions of how to conceptualise agency have gained new focus in recent years with what has been called the ‘ontological turn’ drawing greater attention to the moral dimension of agency (Bochow, Kirsch, and van Dijk 2017; Fassin 2012; Lambek 2010; Lambek et al. 2015). Questions of agency have also been sparked by scholars (especially in Africa) contending with the relationship between agency and structure in contexts of crisis, chaos, and instability where actors are not working with a stable system of meanings and practices (E. Cooper and Pratten 2015; Johnson-Hanks 2005; Vigh 2006, 2009).

Henrik Vigh’s notion of ‘social navigation’ is often used as a metaphor for practice. It captures the idea of agency as an active and dynamic process of

mediation that is neither pre-determined by one's social condition and position within social relations nor entirely independent of it. In Vigh's words, social navigation refers to the 'attempted construction, plotting, and actualization of a social trajectory not on a defined and demarcated stable ground, but in a moving and fluctuating socio-political environment' (Vigh 2006, 236). Such an approach allows us to conceive of agency not as some inherent quality, nor as a form of 'resistance' or means of 'coping' (Guyer 2017, 343, 346). Rather, it sees agency as a dynamic interaction and a social process that is unevenly distributed. It is a process that involves various dimensions (collective, individual, ethical, and political) and registers (as practice, language, discourse, and morality). In this thesis I conceptualise agency as a relational (and ethical) process that involves people's attempts, desires, and aspirations to shape the circumstances under which they live in ways that best accommodate their needs and give them a greater sense of meaning and control.

Where does this leave us? As noted earlier, I propose that the concept of moral economy offers us a way to conceptualise the dialectic between the structural conditions and macro social forces that shape the social field people negotiate in their everyday lives, on the one hand. And, people's actions (involving both strategic calculation and self-interest and value-based considerations) that constitute, maintain, and contest these same terrains of action, on the other. In the section below, I briefly review the concept of 'moral economy' and the debates that have followed the term's recent revival, and outline why I find elements of this framework useful.

The concept of ‘moral economy’, since its original formulation by E.P. Thompson (1971), has been instrumental in critiquing mainstream accounts of economic life that dis-embed relations of exchange and production from their social contexts and the moral logics that underpin them and give them meaning (Götz 2015; Siméant 2011). For Thompson, the notion of a moral economy referred to a system of exchange, supported by norms of reciprocity and obligation, characterising pre-market societies. The term has for a long time rested on a dichotomy that is now widely disregarded. The concept has nonetheless been valuable in refusing the conflation of rationality with economic maximisation and capturing the moral dimension of economic practice and decision-making. The term’s resurgence in a more pluralistic sense (Fassin 2009) has been facilitated by the ‘ethical turn’ in anthropology and a growing interest in the study of moralities (Fassin 2012; Lambek 2010; Lambek et al. 2015). A debate has ensued around the varied meanings of the concept with some scholars placing greater emphasis on the ‘economy’ and others on the ‘moral’ in ‘moral economy’ (Carrier 2018; Fassin 2009; Palomera and Vetta 2016; Siméant 2011). A recurring concern of the term’s wider use as proposed by Fassin (2009) is the danger of diluting the class content of the concept as invoked by Thompson (and later James Scott (1998)). Let’s begin with defining what a moral economy is.

Didier Fassin (2009) argues that the notion of a ‘moral economy’ involves analysis at two levels. This includes an analysis of the system of exchange and distribution, on the one hand, and an analysis of the norms and obligations that guide action, on the other. It is this second evaluative dimension that Fassin thinks has been overlooked in accounts of moral economies, starting with Thompson. Fassin credits James Scott (1998) for

bringing values back into central focus in a discussion on moral economies. He suggests that the re-introduction of values opened up the space for an analysis of moral economies not as a culture or sub-culture associated with a specific group of people or mode of provisioning but rather as a 'social field'.

Fassin postulates that moral economies are 'unstable or at least fluid realities traversed by tensions and contradictions' that are subject to change and are continuously negotiated, according to circumstances and specific relational configurations. I find this conceptualisation of moral economies useful because it regards values, norms and moral orientations not as some abstract or static category but as plural, varied, and intertwined, even inseparable, from social relations and practice. Palomera and Vetta (2016), despite their apprehensions about the more pluralistic use of the term, propose a similar conceptualisation of moral economies as fields 'constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings and practices.' As noted earlier, such an approach conceives of moral economies as irreducibly relational and dynamic and therefore subject to conflict, dilemma, and contradictions (Bochow, Kirsch, and van Dijk 2017; Palomera and Vetta 2016, 414). Consequently, this provides a framework to analyse the intersection of economic practices with moral values, norms and obligations that are inevitably situational, relational and improvised.

Conceptualising moral economies as broader social fields that are plural, historically situated, and involve a political dimension is useful because it allows for analysis of relationships, processes and practices at different

levels. In this thesis, this includes an analysis of: South Africa's relation to a global and increasingly financialised economy; Zandspruit's relation to the increasingly service-sector economy concentrated in the north of Johannesburg; and the moral economy of individual and social group's economic practices and social dependencies. The concept of moral economy does not side-line the broader social forces that shape people's fields of action. Instead, it enables a grounded analysis of larger political-economy processes by restoring – in Fassin's (2009) words – a 'viewpoint from within'. This project is interested in the multiple ways in which moralities shape or infuse young people's ideas, practices and relations. This thesis does not see the 'moral' to be incompatible with the 'political', and, like Palomera and Vetta (2016, 428), understands and applies the term 'moral economy' as an 'anthropological way to study the political economy.'

The various chapters in this thesis showcase how attention to people's moral language provides a powerful vantage point into ordinary people's perceptions and understandings of the structures of power they operate within. Throughout this thesis I examine the intersection of young men's social actions, practices and their conceptions of what is considered acceptable, proper or ethical to unravel the logics and values that precede and give meaning to individual and groups decisions. Although the thesis is primarily focused on the ideas and practices of the unemployed and marginalised, various chapters also shed light on the moral views and ideas that underpin the ideologies and modes of governance used by the state and capital to justify or confront matters of wealth, poverty and inequality. Ultimately, this thesis makes the case for an anthropological conception of

‘moral economy’ that offers a way to reconcile a structuralist and subjective approach to understanding larger political-economy processes.

Relationships as method, subject, and object of analysis

I first set foot in Zandspruit in July 2011. I did not arrive with an interest in young people’s economic lives but rather with the hope of understanding the role of youth in a string of political protests that shook up the community. The last in this sequence occurred a week before I turned up. The surrounding streets were blockaded with burning tyres while running street battles with police ensued. Zandspruit residents’ main gripe was the lack of service delivery and an objection to the chosen candidate for the African National Congress (ANC) in the upcoming local elections. On this July morning, I parked my car at the petrol station opposite the settlement and phoned Lawrence who had agreed to meet me. Lawrence was the community development worker – a public servant deployed in communities with the role of ‘bringing the government closer to the people’ and supposedly helping residents access government services. Lawrence was stuck in a meeting and could not meet me as planned. ‘Sello is coming’, he said over the phone. ‘He knows everything around here’. The phone cut. Five minutes later, a short and broad-shouldered man wearing new white Superga trainers, a Nike shirt and a large diamond earring in his left ear, approached me. It was Sello: a prominent local leader and political broker who at the time was working closely with the dissident ANC faction to challenge the nomination process in the upcoming local elections. I, of course, did not know any of this when we met. In fact, figuring out how Sello made a living and why nearly everyone I met in Zandspruit knew him

(or warned me about him) can best be described as an absorbing riddle that presented me with questions and conundrums this thesis sets out to answer.

Standing outside my car, I explained to Sello I had come to understand the reasons why young people were protesting. Without hesitation or much enthusiasm, Sello agreed to show me around. I would see with my own eyes why people were on the streets, he explained. First, he said, we would stop by his house. We crossed the main road and walked along the sidewalk dotted with car repair businesses, makeshift hair salons, and a multitude of small stalls selling everything from cell phone chargers to cigarettes and brightly coloured plastic bowls filled with fruit. As we walked into the settlement, I noticed the men sitting on the street corner on my left opposite the Somali-run *spaza* shop. It was here a few days later that I met Sizwe who I presented in the introduction. We passed the local primary school and clinic and a large dumpsite where waste piles three-metres high before being collected. At the T-junction, we turned right up a dirt path. Sello's shack sat at the fork of two further footpaths that take you into a maze of narrow passages in the most congested and poorly serviced section of the settlement. Sello had a relatively large three-room shack. It was red with Vodacom signage on the one side and various hairstyles painted on the other. He lived in one half with his girlfriend (who worked as a cashier at a nearby grocery store) and ran a barbershop from the other. On that day, as was the case on most days in the weeks and months that followed, a selection of Sello's friends, neighbours, and the occasional customer, congregated outside the barbershop to discuss the politics and gossip of the day. The interconnected web of people that intersected here (including those who were antagonistic towards Sello) afforded me a window into the

social and economic life of Zandspruit while also allowing me to build up a social network of my own.

Sello was an ideal interlocutor. He not only prided himself on knowing everyone in Zandspruit, but his livelihood and identity also depended on him leveraging a wide network of social relations. Early on, I got the impression that Sello's barbershop was not a serious commercial venture nor was it intended to be one. Sello, like Sizwe, was not forthcoming about how he made his money. On some occasions he referred to himself as unemployed. On other occasions, he told me he was 'working in politic[s].' Over time I uncovered more about Sello's modes of provisioning. This did not occur in a straightforward way in the sense one might expect from asking someone a set of questions in an interview. Rather, it revealed itself in an unfolding of fragments and glimpses that are only possible with an ethnographic approach that prioritises 'being there'. In the words of Sherry Ortner (1995, 173), ethnographic research is 'as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality, a constructive and interpretive mode', as it is a 'bodily process in space and time.'

It was often very ordinary moments, events, and situations, or passing remarks and jokes, that provided some of the most illuminating clues and prompts for informal discussions with Sello. For instance, it was only after observing people come and go from his shack (sometimes involving long-drawn out negotiations and disputes over payment) that I began to apprehend Sello's role within informal governance structures that patrolled the streets at night and managed the transaction of informal land.

Additionally, he worked as an informal magistrate who solved disputes amongst local residents. The disputes were nearly always about money with the most common clashes between landlords and tenants or lovers. He also made a significant amount of money as a *mashonisa* (moneylender) charging interest at fifty per cent (irrespective of the size of the loan).⁴ While Sello's barbershop generated very little income it did provide a space for people to gather which in turn enabled him to extend and maintain the social relations that served as his source of income. The barbershop also denoted a more socially legitimate source for his income. This came in useful when confronted with accusations of corruption and exploitation by political opponents and detractors.

This thesis would not be possible were it not for many of the connections I made through my relationship, directly or indirectly, to Sello. I remain indebted to him for that. It was from the intersection of residents in and around Sello's shack – his relationship with his neighbours, local leaders, clients, girlfriends, family, and peers – that I began to forge personal networks of my own, following a snowball approach. The conjunctions of people that AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) describes as constituting an invisible 'infrastructure' that produce and re-produce life in African cities are not only the object of analysis in this thesis but its method too. Many of the most important relational networks and configurations I discuss in later chapters were, like Sello's barbershop and shack, tied to specific spaces. This includes

⁴ I acquired this information from helping Sello with his book of accounts. This included calculating how much money his various debtors owed him.

street corners, a youth-run NGO office, a roadside job-seeking site, and various other locations including drinking spots, and people's homes. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, these social sites provided the starting point to understand the relations, processes, practices and struggles that organise and structure the economic and social life of the settlement; and the people who live there.

Methods

This thesis is the product of a total of twelve months of ethnographic research. This included three months between July-September 2011 and nine months between June 2015 and February 2016. As is quite evident from above, this project evolved out of an earlier period of research in 2011 and was assisted by the relationships I established then and maintained over the intermingling years.⁵ The key premise of this study is that by focusing on young men's everyday economic and social lives we can better understand the realities and ramifications of the growing unavailability of wage work. Consequently, the methodological approach privileges young people's everyday experiences and practices and the meanings they attach to them. To understand young people's economic decisions it was important to grasp the full range of economic options available and the various factors that shape people's decisions. To attain this bigger picture, I spent the first two months of my fieldwork in 2015 conducting a survey with one hundred

⁵ This included research while working for the Studies in Poverty and Inequality Institute (SPII) in Johannesburg between 2013-2014; research on the national 2014 elections as part of a broader project with the Chair in Social Change at the University of Johannesburg; and a short period of exploratory research before beginning my doctorate in October 2014.

young people⁶ and a mapping exercise of the local economy including semi-structured interviews with forty local enterprise owners.⁷ This information revealed important patterns and differences between social groups, especially on the basis of nationality and gender, which I explore in Chapters Three and Four. These exercises also enabled me to build up relationships that helped me establish myself within different social networks – an essential part of this kind of research.

As noted earlier, the richest data came from my sustained participation in the everyday life-worlds of people like Sello as they went about their daily lives. Consequently, I conducted much of my research on a very informal basis, following people on their various errands and spending many hours with people ‘hanging out’ on street corners, outside taverns, and in community meetings. My interactions with youth in more ‘public settings’ (i.e. political meetings or street corners) provided me with important fragments and details of people’s lives that I was able to return to in in-depth interviews or later informal conversations.

⁶ This included demographic information on young people’s education, housing and tenure status, household arrangements and social obligations, employment status, sources of income, monthly expenses and employment history. It revealed important patterns and differences with respect to gender and nationality concerning the kinds of work people consider desirable along with people’s sources of income, reservation wages, and financial obligations.

⁷ We first recorded every source of income we could think of using the World Bank study of Diepsloot (another post-apartheid settlement in the north of Johannesburg) as a baseline and then mapped these onto a map of the settlement (Manajan 2014). Together we interviewed forty local enterprise owners that included micro-traders, *sangomas* (traditional healer), drug-dealers, and taxi owners, and so on.

Spending time with young people in different settings (and over long periods of time) allowed me to capture different aspects of an important event or situation in someone's life as it 'bubbled up' – often in one way on one occasion and in another way on a different occasion (Das 2015, 10). This approach to knowledge requires what Veena Das (2015, 10) calls 'critical patience.' It also highlighted that the way events, experiences and attitudes are told – and the meanings they hold – are not static but always unfolding in ways that cannot be disassociated from specific practices, processes, and relations. At the same time, it illuminated the ways in which discourses, explanatory frameworks, and moral logics exist within social relations and are a critical component of people asserting, and maintaining, a sense of agency and moral subjectivity. It is for this reason I consider the interviews and informal discussions I conducted as more than a means of data collection but rather as an active mode of 'meaning-making' that is the 'result of on-going dialogue within fields of intersubjectivity' (Jackson 2002, 18, 22).

In collaboration with a youth-run NGO I discuss in Chapter Three I co-hosted twelve debates⁸ that picked up on current events and discussions in

⁸ The twelve debates included the following subjects and current events: 'Are foreigners taking South African's jobs?; Is poverty and unemployment the source of crime?; Fathers = ATM's? Can you be a successful father without a job or money?; Do social grants encourage laziness? Many of these debates became very heated with youth disagreeing with each other. On a few occasions, these differences took a distinctly political form with members of the Economic Freedom Fighters (the far-left opposition party) taking on members of the ANC (the ruling party) who had a strong presence in the youth NGO where we met. While these discussions were open to anyone, the youth who came regularly were primarily those already involved in the NGO or other community and political structures. On one occasion, a Malawian interlocutor arrived at the clinic (where we held our meetings) and was turned away by the security guard. This is indicative of the exclusion many foreigners experienced when attempting to participate in local political and community events.

the media connected to the broader themes of this project. I also participated in various social events; from birthday parties to soccer tournaments, church services to political meetings, and spent weekends in Zandspruit socialising. Once I had built more informal relationships with various youth I began carrying out life and work histories, building on informal discussions, that allowed me to trace young people's economic and social choices and decisions over a longer period of time. I conducted life history interviews with thirty-seven youth; whom I interviewed between two and four times.

This thesis focuses primarily on the experience of young, black South African men. This was the intention of the study from the outset. The reason for this is two-fold. The first stems from my interest in exploring the relationship between work and masculinities in a context of mass unemployment. The second was more accidental. It just so happened that my network of contacts, from the earlier period of research I conducted in Zandspruit, were overwhelmingly male. At the same time, my earlier research in Zandspruit had made clear that young men – more than young women – are more visible in the public spaces where I spent time to build social relations. Men also invariably had more time on their hands. On the contrary, young women (if not at work) were more likely to be tied up in household and care responsibilities. It was also more difficult to spend long periods of time with immigrants who worked long hours (either running their own businesses or working outside the settlement) and did not actively participate in community events. While women and immigrants are not the main subjects of this thesis they are important figures in men's decisions, imaginations and moral worlds. I therefore specifically sought to include the

views of women and immigrants in the study. I got to know several women at the youth-run NGO I discuss in Chapter Three and got to know the girlfriends and mothers of many of the men who are the key protagonists in the thesis. So while my data on both these groups is more limited, I do represent their perspective on the processes and relationships I examine whenever possible.

Relationships built on trust and reciprocity over time not only allowed for more open discussions but also enabled me to get to know some of my interlocutors' families and friends. I went with two of my informants to visit their families in their home villages in the North-West province (4 hours from Johannesburg). Social media and technology also made it possible to stay in touch with many of my interlocutors while in the United Kingdom. These platforms not only provided on-going 'modes of correspondence' (Ingold 2014) but also opportunities for observation and participation within (virtual) social networks. This provided another fruitful source of data – expanding and nuancing my interpretations of young men's lives – while at the same time prompting further research. These virtual platforms and representations of social life were also an on-going reminder that the men whose lives are the subject of this research continue to unfold, sometimes in unpredictable and surprising ways, one day to the next.

Ethics, Positionality & Limitations

During the nine-month period of fieldwork between 2015 and 2016, I rented a back-room in the neighbouring community called Cosmo City. I negotiated the relationships involved in this research in an honest and open

way and ensured the purpose of my research was communicated clearly to my informants, following the accepted principles of professional anthropological associations. I did my research on my own and did not use an assistant (except for the survey and mapping exercise) or interpreter despite not having mastered Sepedi, IsiZulu, Tshivenda or Setswana⁹ in the way I would have liked to. Consequently, all the interviews I conducted were done in English. While the young people I spent most of my time with were well spoken in English, my failure to understand anecdotes, jokes, and tangential comments – especially in informal conversations – did at times constrain my understanding. That said, working alone had the advantage of allowing me to build up relationships and trust on my own terms.

Despite people in Zandspruit knowing the awkward fact that I was studying them, friendships developed and we engaged in the kinds of reciprocal exchanges through which all relationships are maintained. I made a point of not paying people for their assistance (except in the case of the survey and mapping exercise) but to reciprocate in other small ways such as buying beers, helping someone type their CV or a funding proposal, using my car to drive someone to the shops or to get their drivers license renewed, and so on. My insertion or establishment within these relations was never complete and, like all relationships, was subject to negotiation, misunderstandings, and ethical dilemmas. While these accompany all social relations, in this

⁹ These are the four most widely spoken languages in Zandspruit. Strikingly, not one of South Africa's eleven languages is spoken by more than 15 per cent of the population as their home language (or language of origin) (Census, 2011). This points to the fact that the vast majority of people who live in Zandspruit have migrated to the area from elsewhere.

context they had much to do with my positionality as a white woman with relative wealth.¹⁰ Nonetheless, an important part of this research has been to experiment with friendships and meaningful relations across the boundaries of class, race, and gender. While suspicion, distrust and disappointment were (and still are) present in many of my relations in Zandspruit – even with some of my longest-standing relationships – they have also been mutually enriching with moments of generosity, shared understanding, and enjoyment. In the chapters that follow I have attempted wherever possible to write myself into the various fieldwork situations to show ethnographic context but also the method by which I studied it. I have used pseudonyms to guarantee my interlocutors’ privacy while ensuring their stories could be told effectively and accurately.

In much the same way Sello’s livelihood was neither given nor my understanding of it ever conclusive, so too are the economic and social lives of young people in Zandspruit less of a ‘thing’ out there to be studied but rather a lived experience that is ‘always in the making’ (Ingold, 2014). Such an approach appreciates the processual and relational nature of reality that requires a shift in focus towards ‘fields rather than places, boundaries rather than bounded groups, processes rather than processed people, and cultural conflict rather than group culture’ (Desmond 2014, 547). As will be clear, this study is not – nor did it attempt to be – a complete or representative account of ‘Zandspruit’ or ‘youth’. In fact, from a phenomenologically

¹⁰ I included a longer discussion on my positionality as a white women-doing research on black men in the methodology chapter in my masters thesis (Dawson 2012, 18–22). I hope to explore questions of positionality with respect to this work at a later point in time.

orientated paradigm – that views social relations as foundational to social reality – no such account is possible. Zandspruit is not a place that can be studied in any abstract or concrete sense beyond the social forces and social relations that make-up the social terrain of Zandspruit. Put differently, this thesis is not a study *of* Zandspruit but rather takes place *in* Zandspruit. Likewise, I do not consider the subjects of this research to be representative of the category of ‘youth’. My point is simply that the subjects whose lives, choices, and thoughts animate the pages that follow are not static objects or experiences but rather dynamic processes contingent on specific relations in time and space. Such a view affirms the ‘situated[ness] of knowledge’ (Haraway 1988) and its ‘inter-subjective’ dimension (Jackson 2002).

Issues of ethnographic representation and interpretation remain. Throughout the research process I attempted to bring initial analyses and thoughts into conversations to elicit my interlocutor’s feedback. By acknowledging the inter-subjective dimension of this research process, it is possible to appreciate the provisional and prospective nature of people’s lives and interpretations (including my own). The challenge in writing this thesis has been to try and capture this indeterminacy while abstracting enough to tell a lucid story.

Structure and outline of the thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters, of which this introduction is one. **Chapter 2** is dedicated to giving the reader a tangible sense of Zandspruit to situate the reader and contextualise the thesis. The chapter begins with a short history of the informal settlement that traces its development from a

small squatting community to a sprawling settlement. I link the expansion of the settlement to larger economic, social, and political processes in the post-apartheid period. These include shifts in the labour market towards a service-sector economy along with demographic shifts and changing migration patterns. The chapter draws attention to the spatial differentiation within the settlement and the social differentiation amongst Zandspruit residents in terms of employment status and housing and tenure arrangements, further fractured along the lines of class, gender, age and nationality. Taken together, this chapter makes the case for conceptualising Zandspruit as a differentiated but unevenly integrated economic terrain and thus lays the groundwork for the rest of the thesis.

Following on the theoretical points I made earlier in this introduction, Chapter Three and Four document young men's economic practices and strategies to make a living. Specifically, **Chapter 3** focuses on three spatial locations in Zandspruit that represent different modes of (in)dependence. This includes a stretch of road where day labourers wait to be picked up for menial jobs ('labouring'), a youth-run NGO where youth volunteer in various community projects that offer access to state resources ('volunteering'), and an informal car wash stand that is part of a wider street economy ('hustling'). These ethnographic sketches lay the foundation for the second part of the chapter that considers young men's disdain for low-paid work and the appeal of livelihoods outside of the wage economy. This chapter contends that the reliance on alternative economic livelihoods is not, as is often presumed, a last resort or a desperate remedy due to the absence of wage work. Rather, these modes of provisioning are an attempt

by these young men to guard themselves against succumbing to the available but intolerable jobs.

Following Chapter Three, **Chapter 4** considers the uneven distribution of choice and the different levels of exposure and shelter from the lowest paying jobs. By employing the life-history method this chapter compares the experiences of two of my interlocutors who despite coming from similar socio-economic backgrounds represent divergent social positions and trajectories. By comparing Thabo (a long-standing resident who makes a living in the informal economy wiring illegal electricity connections) and Joel (a recent migrant who works in a casual retail job in-between long stretches of unemployment) we gain insight into the factors that shape young people's economic choices and decisions. In the later part of the chapter I theorise the processes that structure the livelihood choices of individuals and the conditions that differentiate their chances of success. This chapter argues that a person's social position within Zandspruit and their access to social ties and property feature predominantly in their ability to escape precarious work in the capitalist economy. The chapter also points to the significance of citizenship in a profoundly local sense to understanding social differentiation, on the one hand, and the organisation of both the labour market and local economy, on the other.

In Chapter Five and Six, I move to a discussion on the existential, social, and political implications of the declining prospects of wage work for young men. These chapters demonstrate how young men not only respond to wider social and economic transformations taking place in the wake of mass

joblessness but also actively construct new social relations, obligations, and configurations of meaning. **Chapter 5** focuses on how young men reconcile, negotiate, and contest the content and parameters of their social obligations to their children, and their status as fathers. Through the use of my interlocutors' narratives I draw attention to the material circumstances and moral frameworks that shape how young men delineate and discern between their social obligations and other competing demands on their money. The chapter critically engages with the 'crisis of masculinity' discourse by showing how it fails to capture the situational and provisional forms of collaboration and conflict that characterise men's relationships with their children and families.

Chapter 6 examines the dilemmas and disjunctures that accompany young men's aspirations for social mobility. The chapter focuses on Motswako Pot – a popular buy and braai restaurant in the heart of Zandspruit – where my interlocutors come face to face with the widening discrepancies in black wealth. This offers a unique vantage point to examine how young men assess their current position and chances of getting ahead in relation to the inequalities around them. The chapter argues that the widespread concern with the legitimacy and authenticity of black wealth and consumption not only reflects the contradictions in young men's lives but indexes a much more profound disquiet with democracy itself.

The concluding chapter, **Chapter 7**, focuses on the political significance of young men's refusal of low-wage work. I argue that the refusal of work is more than a critique of the continuing reality of socio-economic exclusion,

arguing instead that this act of resistance also involves a moral demand for a more ‘just’ and ‘fair’ distribution of resources. This chapter also elaborates on my opening contention concerning the productivity of unemployment and its implications for re-thinking the normative centrality of wage work in our scholarly and social policy debates.

Chapter 2

Zandspruit: a post-apartheid informal settlement

Introduction

Zandspruit is connected to Johannesburg's inner city via Beyers Naude Road. This road begins at the University of Johannesburg in Auckland Park (a leafy green suburb) and winds its way through the older (still predominantly white) suburbs of Northcliff and Blackheath to the newer and more racially diverse suburbs of Sundowner, Northwold and Ruimsig. These newer residential areas have taken a particular post-apartheid form with town house complexes and gated communities as the norm. The 30km road is lined with shopping malls, drive through fast food restaurants, car dealerships and large billboards advertising the latest cars, fashion trends and expensive alcohol. You are getting close to Zandspruit when you pass a four-way intersection with the Northgate dome (a large multi-purpose event venue) to your right and a newly built 'affordable' townhouse complex on your left. If you continue straight you will pass the turn-off for the luxury Jackal Creek Golf Estate and the Honeydew police station on your right, and a dirt soccer pitch on your left. Then, as if out of nowhere, shacks begin to protrude onto the sidewalk, electricity wires criss-cross above, and the pavement to the right is chock-a-block with commuters, traders and hustlers. Welcome to Zandspruit.



Figure 1: Beyers Naude Road

The sidewalk doubles up as the main avenue for informal trade. Many of the shacks that jut into the street operate as homes as well as hair salons, shoe repair stands, and stalls of various sizes. The smaller makeshift tables sell oranges, sweets, small packets of chips, and cigarettes, while the larger establishments sell vegetables, second hand clothes, mobile phone accessories, and traditional medicines. Some vendors operate from shipping containers that stock larger items including winter blankets, paraffin cookers, mattresses, and roller suitcases. Others selling sugar cane, avocados, and *naartjies* operate from the back of car boots and open *bakkies* (small pick-up trucks). Cages crammed with bony chickens are also common. Still others, especially those selling pirated DVD's and CD's, walk up and down the street with their stock in a pouch. They do this to escape the police who raid this strip from time to time. It is common to see women sitting alongside one another, sometimes six or more, all selling identical bags of rice, roasted peanuts, spinach, beans, or biscuits on a plank of wood

balancing precariously on a plastic bucket. Many of these women have their young children with them. The majority of traders I met on this walkway were middle-aged women, and often immigrants. A large study in another informal settlement not far from Zandspruit found that foreign nationals, while only making up 19 per cent of the population, ran close to 50 per cent of all local businesses (Manajan 2014, 16–17).

While the majority of micro-business owners live in Zandspruit, I met a few entrepreneurs who make their way to Zandspruit each day, often from a significant distance, to profit from the high pedestrian traffic along this stretch of road. An Indian man in his mid-50s from Fordsburg (a suburb 21km south of Zandspruit) commutes to the settlement six days a week to sell furniture and mattresses – a business he has run for close to ten years. Most days during my fieldwork two big brash Nigerian men could be found sitting on the perimeter of the settlement with a sign that read: ‘cash for gold’. The brothers own a 2-bedroom house in Cosmo City but make their livelihood on the streets of Zandspruit. There is considerable competition in the ‘cash for gold’ business. One competitor offers no cash in exchange for jewellery. Instead, this group of men in their thirties who also live outside of the settlement, walk the streets in the late afternoons soliciting gold and silver jewellery in exchange for counterfeit Versace and other designer handbags. A woman in her forties, whose house I frequented often, insinuated that the syndicate’s most profitable clients are domestic workers who steal jewellery from their employers in exchange for ‘fake’ designer bags.

On the other side of Beyers Naude, adjacent to the petrol station and before the main four-way stop, a concrete ditch and patch of grass provides the main waiting area and pick up point for day labourers. Nearly all the jobs on offer here involve manual labour and pay far below the minimum wages stipulated by the law. There are also a number of informal mechanic and auto-repair businesses at this intersection. A large pedestrian bridge built in 2010 crosses this stretch of road. Despite appeals and protests by residents to have this bridge included in the upgrade of the motorway, very few of them use it. They prefer to dash across the busy street by manoeuvring around the concrete barriers the municipality erected to prevent this. Today, the bridge is one of the main assembly points for the illegal electricity networks that tap power from the neighbouring plots.

On the corner of Beyers Naude Road and Marina Drive is a garden nursery that pre-dates the squatter camp. It is a reminder of the area's former peri-urban character. If you turn right onto Marina drive, mini-bus taxis tout for business in front of the main shopping strip with a few large chain stores and formal outlets. These include a wholesale grocery store, a bottle store and various low-end clothing stores, as well as branches of all the major banks. There is also an Internet café, a funeral parlour, and a chemist. This side of the settlement is less busy but still buzzes with retail activity. In the late afternoon, as people return from work, fires in metal tins and gas cookers emerge on the roads edge to grill *mielies* (corn) on the cob, skewed meat and spiced chicken wings, and deep fry chips. These are favourites of many urban workers at the end of a long day.



Figure 2: Marina Drive

There are three main entrances into Zandspruit by car; one is a dusty road off Beyers Naude that snakes between closely packed shacks on four narrow plots collectively dubbed the ‘private properties’. This is undeniably the most underserved, congested and dangerous section of the settlement. The other two entrances – along Marina drive – are tarred. The first brings you into the original reception area that is still referred to as ‘transit camp’ where the local clinic and primary school can be found. The second entrance brings you down a stretch of road on the right that divides the older and grossly underserved areas from the newer and partly formalised ones. The road borders a newly built taxi rank on the left and Motswako Pot (a popular *shisa nyama*¹¹ restaurant). Given its reputation for selling some of the

¹¹ *Shisa Nyama* is a Zulu phrase that means to ‘burn meat’. It is used to describe a *braai* (barbecue) where people come together to grill meat on an open fire (usually near a butchery from whom the meat is bought).

best-grilled meat in northern Johannesburg, it attracts the growing black middle classes in the surrounding area. It is at its busiest over the weekend when the upwardly mobile come to socialise, drink, and enjoy the latest gossip, at the same time as having their expensive cars admired. One local resident described Motswako to me as the ‘Soweto¹² of the north’ and a place where locals can associate with ‘people who’ve done well for themselves.’



Figure 3: Motswako Pot Buy and Braai

To a passer-by Zandspruit appears a uniform terrain of informality, deprivation, violence and illegality. This image is also perpetuated in the

¹² Soweto is South Africa's largest township to the southwest of downtown Johannesburg. Its name is an abbreviation for South Western Townships. Soweto has a mixed-income resident profile and is home to a growing number of South Africa's black middle class (Alexander et al. 2013; Krige 2011a).

media. A Google search for Zandspruit turns up the following headlines: ‘Residents of Zandspruit block roads over disconnected electricity connections’; ‘Looters damage fuel station shop amid Zandspruit electricity protest’; ‘Zandspruit residents stage land grab in Honeydew’. These headlines perpetuate an image of the settlement as one typified by deprivation and violence. Such accounts fail to capture the heterogeneity and dynamism that characterise the everyday economic and social life of the settlement in the present, and, the political contestation over its future.

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to providing an in-depth account of Zandspruit’s expansion and densification to contextualise the chapters that follow. In the next section I present a truncated history of the settlement that traces its development from a small squatting community to a settlement of over thirty thousand residents, most of whom share a one square kilometre of shacks. This section, and the one that follows, links the expansion of Zandspruit (and its strategic location for many job seekers) to the rapidly urbanising periphery that surrounds it. This section also draws attention to the interconnection between the formal and informal economy and makes the case for viewing Zandspruit as a differentiated but unevenly integrated economic terrain. The final section includes a discussion on the social composition of the settlement. I draw attention to the heterogeneity of the people who live in Zandspruit by analysing various categories of difference that shape people’s relationship to the settlement.

History: an unequal and urbanising periphery

1994-2000: The early years

Zandspruit's beginnings lie in a wave of farm evictions during the tumultuous transition from apartheid to democracy. In anticipation of new land reform legislation in the early 1990s, hundreds of black African farm dwellers and labour tenants were ejected from nearby agricultural estates owned by white, predominantly Afrikaans families (Mntungwa 2014). Many of those expelled from agricultural holdings had lived on the land for many years, often decades, with many having worked for the owners as gardeners or domestic workers. With few other options, those evicted began squatting on open land in and around the suburbs of Honeydew and Northriding. The local council, then under the leadership of the Democratic Party (DP) – now the Democratic Alliance (DA) and main opposition party – was responsible for finding a solution. Together with the financial support of Rhema church, the council bought a vacant plot of land. They divided it into two hundred and fifty stands and assisted the squatters with the construction of temporary shelter. This plot became known as 'transit camp.' The effect of dismantling the influx controls in the 1980s, along with the expectations of a 'better life' ushered in by the first democratic elections, was an influx of people into Johannesburg – many of whom wound up in informal settlements on the city's edge.

By 1996, the local council had grown increasingly anxious about the settlements' expansion. To stem new arrivals the council registered the original settlers and some of the newcomers on a housing database. This

created a distinction between registered or eligible residents and illegal or ineligible squatters (Royston and Narsoo 2006). 'Transit camp' was fenced off and security guards were posted at the main entrances to prevent more people from erecting shacks. These attempts backfired. The registration process raised hopes that the government would formalise the area, declare it a township, and eventually build houses. These expectations, along with the settlements' relative proximity to jobs, drove further in-migration. By the turn of the millennium, 'transit camp' had expanded to an estimated three thousand shacks. The first signs of infrastructure provision aggravated the rifts between established residents and newcomers. Foreign nationals were the first targets. In October 2000, as water and sanitation were being installed, foreign nationals were violently driven out of the area by vigilante groups. Their shacks were burnt and their property destroyed. Research done at the time suggested the main motivation for expulsing foreigners was to exclude them from benefitting from the anticipated housing development (Royston and Narsoo 2006, 14).

The early 2000s saw the gradual invasion and occupation of four adjacent privately owned plots. In oral accounts of this period, a man known as Mabaso under his bogus company 'Mabaso and Son' emerges as the prime instigator of the occupation. The story goes that Mabaso claimed to have bought the land, sub-divided it, and sold stands to backyard dwellers and tenants in 'transit camp' (who wanted more space or were tired of paying rent) along with new arrivals. Pieces of land ranged in size and were sold for between R200 (\$14) and R1000 (\$70). One of my interlocutors, Senzo (age 27), grew up in the 'private properties' with his grandmother. In one of our conversations he recalled the years of Mabaso's reign: 'you want this piece

of land [pointing to his grandmother's stand]', he said, impersonating Mabaso, 'give me R1200 and I will cut a piece for you'. 'We paid, got some land and built a shack', he said. People's views of Mabaso were mixed. Some residents noted that land invasions were the only way for black people (especially those not on the housing list or who do not qualify for government housing) to access a piece of land to erect a shack of their own. One of my informants, for example, described Mabaso as 'doing a favour [for] us blacks' because without him many of Zandspruit's residents would be without land. Other residents, however, did not subscribe to this view. Instead, they viewed Mabaso (and others like him) as misleading residents, profiting off the poor's vulnerability, and stalling the government's investment in housing and service provision. This view was especially common amongst the longest standing residents.

Distinctions between insiders and outsiders and qualifiers and non-qualifiers intensified from the mid-2000s as the area saw new waves of immigration, including growing numbers of non-citizens. The continual influx of people into the area must be seen in relation to a rapid spatial restructuring in the surrounding locale. Much of the vacant land that used to surround Zandspruit has been transformed into 'satellite cities, business nodal points and commercial entertainment clusters' (Herbert and Murray 2015, 471). These developments led to growing numbers of people flocking to the area to find work on construction sites, in retail hubs, and new suburban estates. These economic opportunities created a growing demand for cheap, affordable rental accommodation. This gave rise to a booming rental market and a new fault line – that of landlords and tenants. This fuelled existing

divisions between long-established residents and newcomers giving rise to recurrent cycles of land occupation, eviction, and protest action.

2001-2018: Uneven development, 'empty promises' and protests

Between 2000-2010, the ANC-government made some strides in attending to the infrastructure and housing needs of residents in Zandspruit. This was a welcome change. The government's absence until the mid-2000s can be partly explained by Zandspruit's inclusion within a larger ward¹³ controlled by the main opposition party – the DA. Before 2006, the municipality refused to provide even the most rudimentary of services to those living in the 'private properties' section of the settlement. They feared doing so would recognise these 'illegal' squatters 'right' to this land and further their claim to housing. The ANC's bid to win the 2006 local government election in this rapidly urbanising corner of Johannesburg changed all of this. Zandspruit's residents were no longer invisible. They, or rather their votes, were essential to the ANC's political aspirations.

From the mid-2000s, alongside much private development in the immediate area, the ANC-government began building thousands of subsidised houses on the open land adjacent to Zandspruit that are today part of Cosmo City. Cosmo City is the government's first mixed-income mega-housing project. It exemplifies the ANC-government's vision of a post-apartheid township

¹³ A ward is the smallest political unit in South Africa. Each ward has an elected councillor – accountable to political party structures and the electorate; and an elected ward committee – accountable to members of the ward.

and a shift in government housing policy away from building a few hundred units at a time to mega-housing projects consisting of thousands of units (Ballard 2017; Ballard and Rubin 2017). Cosmo City comprises 5000 low-income fully subsidised Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses, 1000 rental apartment units, 3000 somewhat larger credit-linked partially subsidised houses for middle-income earners, and 3300 even larger privately bonded open-market houses for those in higher income brackets. To the dismay of many people in Zandspruit, the RDP houses were not for them. They had been allocated to residents of Zieverfontein (another informal settlement) who had been evicted to free up land for a large privately developed luxury golf estate.

Shortly before the 2006 elections, as hundreds of RDP houses were being built in Cosmo City, Zandspruit was incorporated within the same municipal ward as Cosmo City. There was much talk at the time of a housing project 'in Zandspruit for Zandspruit' consisting of 6000 housing units. Zandspruit residents were effectively told to be patient because they were next in line. When the ANC won the local elections in 2006 it was ostensibly on the backs of Zandspruit residents' votes. By 2011, when I first arrived in Zandspruit, people's patience had long elapsed with the large majority of residents still without houses or 'proper' sanitation and electricity.

While it would be erroneous to say there has been no government investment in Zandspruit the little development that occurred during the ANC's first term of governance (2006-2011) was slow, haphazard and

deepened the social and spatial divides within the settlement. The infrastructural development was concentrated in 'transit camp' and three new plots of land the government purchased. 'Transit camp' received tarred roads and storm-water drainage and a few hundred houses were built on the new plots that overlooked Cosmo City. Today, these three sections are referred to as 'new stands', 'plot 70' (known as extension nine), and 'plot 52' (known as extension ten or simply '52'). The housing project was never completed and remains shrouded in allegations of corruption and nepotism. In 2009, after 262 houses were built the contractor left never to return again. The result is 185 residents who till this day have foundations but no house. It is widely acknowledged that many of the occupants of the 262 RDP houses (along with some of the serviced stands) were not the original occupants nor were they on the 1996-housing registry. Some local leaders claim these houses were sold to people from outside the area. Despite these concerns, the three newer areas have a more suburban feel with tarred roads, more widely spaced houses, and 'proper' electricity connections. In contrast, the 'private properties' resemble an urban slum with open sewage, inadequate water drainage and severe overcrowding.



Figure 4: Slum like conditions in the 'private properties'



Figure 5: RDP house in the 'new stands'

By 2011, the deplorable living conditions of people in the 'private properties' became fodder in a factional battle within local ANC structures. The local councillor was accused of prioritising the needs of the residents in

the newer sections of the settlement and abandoning those in the 'private properties'. This fissure led to a string of violent protests in the build-up to the 2011 elections (Dawson 2014a, 2014b). In 2011, a local leader described how the uneven provision of basic services within Zandspruit was 'dividing people into these ones [who] have electricity and these ones [who] do not [...] making people to hate [...] because when we striking most people from [plot] 52 they not striking. It's only people from this side [private properties]'. The feeling of abandonment and resentment was palpable in 2011. 'Zandspruit is older than Cosmo City', a vocal local activist told me as we walked towards his dark two-room shack. 'We were working hard to get ward 100 developed but at the end of the day they [the ANC] took *our* land and gave it to Cosmo City. They gave everything to Cosmo. We have nothing', he said. Pointing to the golf estate in the distance, he noted, 'even Jackal Creek, that's our land'. One of the consequences of such suburban developments in the surrounding area has been the skyrocketing of land prices on the urban periphery. The mounting cost of urban land, together with a growing and divisive population, is enough to thwart any government plans to formalise the settlement into a 'township'.

Despite widely held grievances amongst Zandspruit residents, the ANC was re-elected in 2011 on the back of renewed plans for a township development. Eight years on, little has changed. The majority of residents remain without housing, formal electricity, and adequate sanitation. The government's long-term neglect of the area and failure to deliver on its plans has given rise to further land invasions and occupations in the last few years. A process of 'pirate-urbanisation' has taken root that has seen a local

elite extract value from the allocation, selling, and renting of land (Davis 2006, 38–40). Similar dynamics have taken hold of the informal electricity network, which I discuss in Chapter Four. To fully understand the dynamics that underpin the informal rental and electricity market one has to comprehend the ways in which Zandspruit’s internal economy articulates with the economy as a whole.

A differentiated and unevenly integrated economic landscape

Zandspruit’s expansion and densification needs to be seen in relation to wider economic and spatial dynamics. The mass influx of people into Zandspruit over the last two decades can be seen as both a manifestation of, and response to, what Owen Crankshaw (2008) has termed the ‘post-fordist spatial order’ concentrated in the north of Johannesburg. The shedding of industrial jobs in the post-apartheid period has meant the old apartheid townships that served as dormitories for a black labour supply under apartheid (situated predominantly in the south of Johannesburg) have been displaced in the shift towards an increasingly service sector economy concentrated in the north of the city.

In my conversations in Zandspruit, the incessant flow of new arrivals was often explained by drawing attention to the fact that the settlement was ‘close to jobs’. Eric, a long-standing resident in Zandspruit, told me that Zandspruit is a ‘good place’ to live because it is ‘in the centre district of malls’ and ‘there are businesses [...], industrial parks and you’re nearer to the CBD [Central Business District]’. The census data confirms that Zandspruit residents are more likely to find work. In 2011, 45 per cent of

Zandspruit's residents were employed in some form of economic activity.¹⁴ This was 4 per cent more than informal dwellers elsewhere in Gauteng and notably more than South Africa as a whole (StatsSA, 2011). These statistics are confirmed by other research that shows informal dwellers in urban areas have significantly higher employment prospects than those living in rural and more formal urban areas (Hunter and Posel 2012, 294). In the survey I conducted, the majority of jobs carried out by young people fell into three categories: wholesale and retail as a clerk, merchandiser, or cashier; in catering or accommodation as a waitress/waiter or bartender; or in private security or contract cleaning.

Eric's point that Zandspruit was 'nearer the CBD' highlights the primacy of location-based factors in people's work and residential choices. These are closely connected to the high monetary and time costs of commuting to and from work. Transport costs have increased over the post-apartheid period making job seeking prohibitively expensive (Kerr 2017). This reality came home to me after meeting a young man in Zandspruit who lived in a rented shack in Zandspruit from Monday to Thursday but returned to his 3-bedroom family home in Soweto on the weekends. The R300 (\$20) he paid

¹⁴Of those employed, 62 per cent work in the formal sector, 21 per cent in private households (as domestic workers or gardeners), with only 13 per cent active in the informal sector (StatsSA, 2011). These statistics suggest the informal sector provides a livelihood for a much smaller number of people than the formal sector. My research suggests that the township economy offers many avenues to make money that cannot be easily classified as businesses or enterprises, and might therefore not be reflected in the census statistics.

in rent for a shack was half the amount he paid commuting from Soweto to Kya Sands (an industrial suburb near Zandspruit) in a month.

Eric also linked Zandspruit's proximity to work opportunities in nearby shopping malls, office parks, and industrial areas to the opportunities to make money in Zandspruit's local economy. Eric explained: 'You can also make money here rather than being at home [in rural areas] or wherever you are because there's more cash flowing around in Zandspruit'. A number of my interlocutors stressed that one of the primary advantages of living in the city was the increased opportunities to 'hustle' a living for oneself. 'Petty money is easy to come by in Zandspruit', Mandla told me. 'This is how *Jozi* [slang for Johannesburg] is different from the rural areas. No matter where you are in Joburg, [even if you are in] in the poorest area in *Jozi*, there is this different culture of money being accessible'. In the rural areas, he explained, you can ask many people to find just R2 'but in Zandspruit someone can easily give you R50 [\$4]', he said. Sipho, now 32, who moved to Zandspruit in 2008 made a similar set of remarks by contrasting his life in Zandspruit to his home village in Limpopo province. 'I think life this side is better than at home. Even if it is a squatter camp', he said. In Zandspruit, he continued, 'you can find anything you want.'

The wage income that enters and circulates in Zandspruit creates a thriving market for many local businesses and entrepreneurs. Much of the local economy – from hair salons, traditional healers, criminal activity, and the rental market – can be understood as a 'system of distributed livelihoods' (Ferguson 2015, 94), whereby those 'who do not have access to wage

labour endeavor to capture a piece of the wages earned by those who do' (Ferguson 2015, 94). It is thus critical to approach Zandspruit as an integrated economic landscape in which the formal and informal economies are not structurally disconnected but rather articulate with one another as part of a 'differentiated whole' (Callebert 2014; du Toit and Neves 2007).

Many of the people who migrate to Zandspruit to work in the formal economy require relatively cheap and flexible rental accommodation. The surplus labour that pushes down wages creates immense competition for rental accommodation. Consequently, landlords can charge as much as R500 (\$35) for a one-roomed shack with no electricity and as much as R1200 (\$85) for a concrete room. These same residents also need access to electricity, credit, food, alcohol, and the like. So while the buying power of those with jobs in the surrounding areas are often very low – the concentration of people with these jobs creates a booming local economy for electricity connectors, loan sharks known as *mashonisas*, local convenience stores known as *spaza* shops, and taverns who serve the needs of these precarious labourers. The local economy is dependent on the wages that residents earn outside the settlement. The linkages between the wage and wageless economy are especially apparent in the temporal rhythms of the local economy and the social life of the settlement.

Zandspruit has distinct weekday and weekend routines and rhythms. During the week, the flow of people and money are directed by the comings and goings of those who earn wages outside the settlement. The township economy maps onto the temporal rhythms of the wage economy. In the

early hours of the morning, for example, women are up before their children to bake scones to sell to commuters on their way to work. There is a discernible lull in the hum and pace of the settlement after those with jobs have left. People stroll through the settlement dropping and collecting children from crèche, waiting at the clinic, visiting friends, and shopping at the nearest *spaza* shops. The first half of the morning is when the majority of residents (primarily women) restore order to their shacks and prepare for the daily chores: the soaking and washing of clothes and the scrubbing of pots from the previous night's meal. The communal water taps, where residents fill up large buckets of water, become lively sites of sociality.

The occupation and use of urban space in Zandspruit is highly gendered. This has considerable implications for the operation of the township economy. Most unemployed men left their shacks in the mid-morning and congregated on street corners, outside *shebeens* (small drinking taverns) or other informal businesses. Women, on the other hand, tended to gather in groups in designated trading areas (outside schools or near transport hubs) but often remained closer to their shacks or inside their yards. In the afternoon, when the morning's chores were over, women's yards became the primary site for amusement, gossip, and hair braiding. Many women also ran small micro businesses from their homes lending money or selling pre-packaged food, second-hand clothes, or cosmetics from a catalogue. In the afternoons, as people return from work, the streets that were dotted with women selling scones in the morning are much busier with traders selling all the ingredients one needs for an evening meal, or, for those who live alone or could not be bothered, the township version of fast-food.

There is a tacit understanding in Zandspruit that governs the temporality of the noise economy. On weekday evenings, for example, the majority of residents – whether they work outside of the settlement or not – stay home, watch TV, and often go to bed before 10 pm. As the weekend approaches, the atmosphere and sounds of the settlement shift. People begin to play their music louder, the streets become livelier, and the taverns fuller and rowdier. This shift is closely connected to the circulation of money through the settlement, and in particular the payment of wages on Fridays and at the end of the month. This regular cash injection into the local economy not only constitutes particular social spaces and socialities but also entire parallel economies (Bolt 2014). The wage rhythms were particularly visible in the disproportionate drinking that occurred on the weekend at the end of the month, along with the resultant spike in crime and violence.

Many of my interlocutors expressed heightened concerns about their personal safety on Friday and Saturday nights. Fears were especially high on payday because the *tsotsis* (criminals), as a Zimbabwean man put it, can ‘smell’ the cash in people’s pockets. One of my interlocutors, a young man called Tshepo, detailed the danger of moving around the settlement at night when criminals and thugs dominate the streets. ‘[If] the guys see that you have money they [will] go outside your home [and] take advantage of you because they have a gun’. ‘I don’t go [out] at night’, he declared, ‘You have to play it safe [...] If you go out at night you have to know who your trust is on. You’ve got to know how to handle those people whose work is by night. So when you go at night and you have money, they [the criminals] say what

do you want with the night?’ I spent very little time in Zandspruit after dark. But, through my conversations with residents like Tshepo, I came to appreciate that just like the waged and unwaged economies are interdependent so too are the economies of the night and day. The criminals and extra-legal patrol groups that profit from the ‘night economy’ in Zandspruit rely upon the wage income of those who work during the day.

The intricate links between wage labour and various types of informal enterprise can also be seen in the rental market, *stokvels* (informal savings clubs), *mashonisas* (loan sharks), and a system of credit that has developed in relation to local *spaza* shops and *shebeens*. That many informal enterprises rely on the wage income that enters the township economy illustrates why the formal and informal economy cannot be viewed as separate. This perspective requires us to conceptualise Zandspruit as a differentiated but unevenly integrated economic terrain that is structured by power dynamics and forms of social differentiation. In the chapters that follow I examine the dynamics of incorporation in the formal labour market and the local economy. Simply put: who does what to make money, how, and why? To answer these questions we need to first learn more about the people who reside within Zandspruit.

Social composition and fault-lines

Zandspruit’s population is over thirty thousand, almost entirely black African (99%), and is particularly youthful. 55 per cent of Zandspruit residents are classified as youth (age 15 to 34) compared with 43 per cent in Gauteng and 36 per cent in South Africa as a whole (StatsSA 2011, 2016).

The majority of residents have not completed secondary school with only 23 per cent of the population having finished ‘matric’.¹⁵ As little as 3 per cent of the population hold a higher qualification (StatsSA 2011). 58 per cent of Zandspruit’s population is male and only 42 per cent female. This reflects the gender dynamics in most informal settlements with a higher proportion of men to women. It is important to stress that while urban migration has long been male-dominated, growing numbers of women are moving to urban areas looking for employment (Casale and Posel 2002).

The original settlers who were moved to ‘transit camp’ in 1994 from the surrounding areas have been followed by further waves of migration into the area. In 2011, only 25 per cent of Zandspruit’s population was born in Gauteng province. A further 30 per cent came from Limpopo province and 19 per cent from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland. Significantly smaller numbers of people have migrated from the other seven provinces within South Africa (StatsSA, 2011). The proportion of foreign migrants in Zandspruit is nearly five times more than South Africa as a whole and 1.5 times more than the average for informal settlements in Gauteng province (Budlender and Fauvelle-Aymar 2014). The presence of foreign nationals is thus a significant feature of the economic and social life of the settlement. The implications of this are explored in later chapters.

¹⁵ ‘Matric’ is the term commonly used to refer to the final year of high school.

As we saw earlier, the rifts between long-established residents and multiple other groupings of newcomers over the past twenty years are a loaded one. It is also not clear-cut. People are not only categorised by their nationality but by when they arrived and the specific section of the settlement they live in and its own micro-history and politics. An especially common distinction I heard being made was between ‘the community of Zandspruit’, that referred to long-established residents, many of whom have lived in Zandspruit for fifteen or twenty years, and more recent migrants who are perceived to come to Zandspruit simply for ‘economic reasons’.

In several conversations, I followed up on remarks like these with clarifying questions to establish the basis of membership. One of these conversations was with Prince, a 32-year-old man, who was active in local politics. Sitting on the back side of the popular *shisa nyama* restaurant Motswako, he told me, that the people who can call Zandspruit home ‘were here when Zandspruit started [in the mid-1990s]’. These people, he said, can tell you about Zandspruit when there was just open veld with no shacks or houses. In Prince’s account, the ‘*true* Zandspruitians [emphasis added]’ were those who had been living in the area since 1996 when the government first registered people, added their names to the housing database, and promised to formalise the area and build houses. Since then, he explained, ‘lots of people have been arriving from outside of South Africa but very few of them can call Zandspruit home’. ‘The ones who can call Zandspruit home’, he continued, ‘you see around the festive season when Zandspruit is very quiet.’ ‘They remain here’, he said, ‘they don’t return home.’

Prince's answer to my question is revealing. It suggests the main criteria for (political) membership in the community is closely tied to the length of time someone has lived in the area, itself a reflection of the presence or lack of social ties and obligations elsewhere. The distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' often came into force during protests when newcomers (especially foreigners) were seen to be indifferent to collective struggles for better living conditions (Monson 2015). In July 2011, a week after the third protest that year, a young man by the name of Mandla told me that 'the people who do not care about development [in Zandspruit] are the people who come here for work and then go home'. 'The people who have future plans for this place', he continued, 'are the ones who have lived here for a long time'. 'Some of them [referring to newcomers] have this mind that my home is in Limpopo and I just come here for work'. These distinctions are not trivial. They were widely regarded as the key criteria to obtain preferential access to housing, land, and basic services along with a future claim to a government-subsidised house.

Residential status: stand-owner or tenant

Residents in Zandspruit include owner-occupiers, tenants, landlords and squatters (who do not pay rent). It is very difficult to calculate with any accuracy what proportion of Zandspruit residents 'own' or rent their properties. It is important to distinguish between the few hundred residents with formal title deeds in the more formalised areas and a much larger proportion of long-standing residents with de facto title. The latter include some of the oldest residents who have lived in 'transit camp' since 1994 and been on the housing registry since 1996. It also includes many subsequent arrivals who purchased a stand or section of a subdivided stand on which

they erected a shack. Or, in some cases people who might own their shack but not the land on which the shack is erected. This group of residents can provide various papers as ‘proof’ of their ownership including letters from the housing department and affidavits from the police. Even more common are ‘proof of residence’ letters that are issued by the councillor. These are essential to access a number of services, for example opening a bank account, registering for social grants, and buying a sim card for a mobile phone, and so on.

The majority of landlords in Zandspruit are established residents and nearly always South African while tenants are more likely to be recent migrants and in many cases, but not all, non-citizens. Two other studies on informal settlements in the north of Johannesburg tell a similar story (Gunter 2014, 100; Manajan 2014, 11). The study in Diepsloot informal settlement attributed the lower rates of ownership amongst foreigners to the fears they have of being deprived of their land ‘at the hands of angry citizens’ (Manajan 2014, 11).

It is also important to make a distinction between small-scale and large-scale landlords to understand the rental market in Zandspruit (Gunter, 2014). Small-scale landlords very often live on the same stand and rent out between one and five shacks or backyard rooms as a source of additional income. Large-scale renting is more common in the ‘private properties’ where a handful of landlords have a monopoly over a section or cluster of shacks. Some rent out between twenty and forty shacks profiting in the range of R15-20 000 (\$1050-1400) a month. Many of these shacklords began

acquiring stands in the early 2000s but have gone on to obtain more land through their relations to local leaders and brokers. Landlords normally find tenants for vacant rooms through word of mouth. Similarly, new arrivals in Zandspruit find accommodation through their social networks. The landlord's main consideration when finding a tenant is his or her ability to pay. I was told repeatedly that foreign nationals were more desirable tenants. Firstly, they were perceived to be more likely to work and therefore have the cash to pay rent. Second, given many foreigners precarious legal-status they were easier to control and kick out if they stopped paying. South Africans, on the other hand, were seen to be much harder to control and unreliable at paying rent.

The question of how 'the community' of Zandspruit is defined and who is seen to belong is complicated by the operation of multiple and, at times, competing tenure arrangements and structures of recognition. There is no simple relationship between migrant or residential status (insider/outsider; permanent/temporary) and property ownership (owner/tenant). Nonetheless, as will become clear in the chapters that follow, the social cleavage between 'the [political] community of Zandspruit' – those who are entitled to call it home, and benefit from that right, and those who cannot, and are perceived to be in Zandspruit simply for 'economic reasons' is central to understanding the divergences in the economic choices, standards of living and future horizons of its residents, and the interconnections between those with and without wage income.

Conclusion

This chapter has purposefully sought to resist homogenising and negative representations of Zandspruit as an undifferentiated site of exclusion, deprivation, and violence. By drawing attention to Zandspruit's internal organisation, logics, and rhythms I have presented an image of the settlement that is socially and spatially differentiated. I have shown that to understand the settlement's expansion and densification – from a few hundred evicted farm tenants in the early 1990s to more than thirty thousand residents today – requires us to view it in relation to wider social, political, economic, and spatial shifts. Having comprehended Zandspruit as a dynamic social and economic terrain – rather than a bounded entity or ghetto existence – we can now move onto an account of the economic lives of those who live here.

Chapter 3

Modes of (in)dependence: labouring, hustling and volunteering

Introduction

On a rainy winters day in August 2015, I sat huddled inside a tavern with John and a group of his friends. Our conversation that day, like many others, shifted from a discussion on national politics to a discussion on why the young men surrounding me were without jobs, steady girlfriends, houses of their own, and the kinds of lives they so badly wanted. Many of those gathered blamed the government for failing to create jobs or other opportunities for young people like them. John, who had been nodding in agreement, then chipped in. ‘The problem’, he said, is not just with government but also with people coming ‘from outside’. Before saying any more he quickly insisted he did not have a ‘problem’ *with* foreigners because, as he put it, ‘they’ve struggled more than we struggle.’ Nonetheless, he expressed his disquiet that ‘more foreigners are employed than us South Africans’. Without pause, as if stating a much rehearsed truth, he quickly offered an explanation. ‘These people [foreigners] don’t actually mind getting paid less’, he noted. ‘There is a difference [between us]’, he said. ‘They accept anything.’ He went on to recount that it was foreigners’ ‘desperation’ that made them willing to work for as little as R80 (\$6) a day. ‘But as a South African’, he said, ‘I cannot accept R80’.

John, along with many other unemployed young men I met in Zandspruit, not only actively avoided jobs at the bottom end of the urban labour market

but spoke about his exclusion from wage labour in relation to foreigners relative inclusion. This was not voiced via the prevailing trope of accusing foreigners of taking jobs from locals. Quite the opposite in fact. One young man explained to me that when someone comes to Zandspruit looking for people to work for R100 (\$7) a day the ‘first person who is going to jump for that is a Malawian or Mozambican guy’. ‘Why’? , I asked. ‘Back at home he can’t get that kind of money’, he said. ‘The South Africans simply have that pride’, he continued, ‘they say, I can’t go for that much money. Because if I just go gamble, I can come out with R500 [\$35] a day, so why waste my time with a job’. The manager of a fast food restaurant at a nearby shopping mall made a similar remark in an interview. He attributed the high turnover rates amongst young South African men, as opposed to foreigners and local women, not only to their choosiness, and dissatisfaction in such jobs, but to their ability to ‘hustle R500 a month’, as he put it. His point was that a job flipping burgers, or serving them, was not only demeaning but simply not worth it. In a sense, the manager and the young man above were saying the same thing: youth, like John, are not necessarily without work because there are no jobs available but rather because they can afford to be without work. While this scenario is by no means specific to Zandspruit it is important to note that it is occurring in a place that (when compared to much of the rest of the country) is an island of work opportunities in an ocean of joblessness. It is the increased likelihood of someone finding a job in Zandspruit that makes it a particularly interesting place to examine the lives and choices of the so-called unemployed.

James Ferguson’s (2013, 2015) essay ‘Declarations of Dependence’ is an important touchstone for this chapter. I would, therefore, like to briefly

unpack his argument. In the article Ferguson charts the shift from a period of labour shortages (in the pre-capitalist and colonial era) to a situation of mass joblessness today to draw attention to a particular continuity between these older systems of incorporation. In documenting pre-colonial systems organised around ‘wealth in people’ Ferguson demonstrates the ways in which kings and chiefs fought over people to attain status, power, and influence. Building on such a view, he suggests that the system of wage labour ‘for all its harshness and cruelty’ was – much like these older forms of social membership – a ‘system hungry for people’ (Ferguson 2015, 147). His larger point is that the situation we have today of labour surpluses marks a radical break from the past with people, and especially young men, no longer needed or sought after. This, he suggests, has resulted in those now excluded from wage work making increasingly desperate ‘declarations of dependence’ that have left some even nostalgic for the brutal system of apartheid migrant labour (Ferguson 2013, 235, 2015, 159).

But here we meet a problem: how does Ferguson explain the reluctance of young men like John to take up wage work? While I find Ferguson’s idea of dependence compelling I take issue with his instinct to collapse the extreme diversity of dependencies (from wage work to kin-based sharing, patronage and various informal livelihoods) into one category and thereby, whether intended or not, make one dependency equal to another. The reality in a place like Zandspruit – as we will see later in this chapter – is that not all dependencies (or types of labour) are alike, or equal, nor do they mean the same things to different groups of people (Bolt 2013, 243; Shah 2013, 255). It is critical that we are able to distinguish between different forms of dependence, identify the specific relationships involved, and investigate

their social meanings (Bolt 2013; Rossi 2016, 578). The analytical challenge is to not take these dependencies as given but to investigate their social forms and meanings, and the ways in which different actors evaluate them. Following the insights of Ferguson, I understand dependence, even if it involves an element of submission, as a dynamic terrain of social action and meaning.

This chapter is primarily concerned with two questions: what kinds of dependencies are available to young (unemployed) men in Zandspruit? And, how do young men evaluate these different dependencies? For example: what dependencies are considered dignifying or degrading? And moreover, what dependencies are seen to open up versus foreclose desirable futures? This chapter is divided into two parts. The first section offers an ethnographic sketch of three alternative modes of (in)dependence tied to specific geographic locations in Zandspruit. These include the roadside pick up point for day labourers; an informal car wash stand where young men hustle to get by via a multitude of informal money-making activities; and a youth-run non-governmental organisation (NGO) office where youth ‘volunteer’ in various government and NGO projects. I present these three sites, and the people who occupy them, as a snapshot or heuristic to demonstrate alternative modes of provisioning and their concomitant social meanings, identities and associations. These sketches also provide us with insight into how different individuals and social groups make a living in the present and seek to realise their plans and aspirations for the future. In the second part of the chapter, I explore my interlocutor’s views about these different dependencies and some of the ways in which they distinguish between them, and evaluate them against one another.

Competing modes of (in)dependence

Roadside labouring

Opposite the settlement on Beyers Naude road, a concrete ditch and patch of dry grass separates the arterial road from the petrol station. This area provides the main pick up point for day labourers. As early as five o'clock in the morning men can be found waiting here in the hope of being hired. On a cold and windy morning in June 2015, I made my way across this busy road for the first time. The men gathered were huddled in groups of three and four in an attempt to keep warm and shield themselves from the swirling dust. It was 10 o'clock: four or more hours after many of those waiting had assembled. The men watched the passing cars diligently knowing their chances of securing a day's work by the mid-morning were slim, but not impossible. The men I met that morning, and on subsequent visits to this stretch of road, were all immigrants, most without documents, and between the ages of twenty and forty. The majority had come from Malawi and Zimbabwe, with smaller numbers from Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique.



Figure 6: Group of immigrants waiting for work on the roadside

Roadside job-seeking spots such as this one are common in South Africa, especially in urban centres, and reflect a growing day-labour market (Theodore et al. 2015; Hammond, Bowen, and Cattell 2016; Sterken 2010). The stretch of road opposite Zandspruit is strategically located next to a large building and hardware store (called Build-It) where individuals and small construction companies in need of casual labour buy their materials. The most common jobs available from the roadside include painting, general labour, tiling, brick laying, plastering, and the worst of the lot: rubbish removal that pays as little as R30 (\$2) a load.

When an empty *bakkie* pulls up along the roads edge, the men gathered can be seen running up to the car. The employer (typically, but not always, a white man in his forties or fifties) then announces from his window what

kind of workers he needs, how many, and for how long. Occasionally, employers arrange in advance to pick up a specific group of workers but more often gather up anyone willing to do the work. On a few occasions I saw employers request certificates as proof of competence in a specific skill. In many instances, however, job allocation appeared to be contingent upon connections and, even more important, having someone to vouch for you. Alternatively, to stand a better chance of securing a day's work, job seekers could offer to work for less than the already-measly going rate. Zimbabweans frequently accused Malawians of this practice. The wages on offer in these jobs varied widely but were correspondingly pitiful. Some day labourers earned as little as R60 (\$4) a day while others earned as much as R250 (\$18). The variation depended on the specific employer and the specialisation of the skill involved. In 2015, general labourers typically earned between R80 and a R100 a day whereas bricklayers and tilers made closer to R250.

Day labour work is by definition low-paid, short-term and precarious. The jobs available from the roadside were nearly always short-term arrangements, entirely at the discretion of the employer. Jobs were sometimes limited to a few hours but commonly involved a full day's work, or at most, a couple of days. These kinds of short-term jobs have long been referred to as 'piece jobs': a category used to define a broad range of temporary and marginal forms of employment that lack specificity. Some of the men I got to know on the roadside referred to these short-term jobs as 'giga giga jobs': a local term for a global phenomenon in what is increasingly referred to as a 'gig' economy (B. Wilson 2017). In a sense, these roadside jobs exemplify a growing trend towards labour casualisation, or the

informalisation of the formal economy, where growing numbers of people work in recurrent short-term contracts (or non-contractual arrangements) that carry no formal benefits or labour protections (Bhorat and Mayet 2013; Hunter and Posel 2012; Paola and Pons-Vignon 2013; Cross and Ngandu 2014, 209, 214). It was common knowledge that these roadside jobs were the most insecure and precarious within a wider band of low-paid and low-quality jobs concentrated in domestic work, hospitality and private security.

Most of the immigrants I met on the roadside never escaped the endless search for short-term work. I did, however, meet a few men who managed to secure work with the same employer for an indefinite period of time, ranging from a few weeks to, on occasion, a couple of months. Others worked periodically for the same employer and only came to the roadside when they could not secure work through their own networks. Leonard, who had been in South Africa for six months, characterised his experience as follows: 'Sometimes I can stay [on the roadside] two weeks and get nothing, no work'. Leonard underscored the persistent feeling of economic uncertainty amongst those who depend on these irregular jobs. In these jobs, he said, 'you can go back [to your home country] with nothing, go back naked. It's a 50:50 game'. In contrast, Stanford, a Zimbabwean man, who first came to South Africa in 2010, maintained that there was an abundance of short-term casual jobs in Zandspruit if, he insisted, you're not 'choosy'. Stanford, unlike Leonard, had developed a network of employers and labour brokers (including a garden service and contract cleaning company) who phoned him directly when they had work for him. Occasionally, Stanford was tasked with pulling together a group of workers for a particular job at the company's request. At the time of my fieldwork,

he worked late night cleaning jobs in nearby restaurants and shopping malls for an outsourced company. Stanford was effectively 'on-call' and needed to make himself available as and when the employer demanded. On the nights when he worked, the company picked him up under the pedestrian bridge on Beyers Naude Road and dropped him back in the same spot late at night, often after midnight. While Stanford was happy to have the extra work he questioned if working night shifts was worth it. On more than one occasion he had fallen victim to local thugs who roam the streets looking for anyone foolhardy enough to return home in the dead of night with cash in their pockets.

Not surprisingly, these roadside jobs are widely regarded as the employment of last resort. I heard complaints about the work conditions and pay in these jobs throughout my fieldwork. The immigrants I got to know insisted that they only accepted these day jobs because they had few other options; were precluded from better paying jobs because of their perilous legal status; and had tremendous financial pressure to send money home to their families. Especially noticeable in immigrant accounts was their insistence that South Africa, despite the struggles they endured here, held more work opportunities than their home countries. Victor, who had been in South Africa three years, told me that in Malawi, where he comes from, there is no work. This, he explained, created conflict between his parents, wife, children and himself. In South Africa 'it's better', he continued, because he can 'work a piece job here and there' and send a few hundred rand to his family using his phone. Others were more circumspect. Brian (age 25) had been in South Africa for three months when we first met. He spent his first two weeks in the country knocking on the doors of nearby factories and

industrial parks in the hope of finding better paying work. But like many others, Brian was turned away and succumbed to odd jobs in construction and gardening. During one of our conversations he noted that while it was feasible to find 'piece work' in Zandspruit it was impossible to find 'good jobs' that would, as Brian put it, 'satisfy' his plans and 'stabilise' his situation. Like many of the men I met on the roadside, Brian could not envisage an end, at least anytime soon, to a life structured by the endless search for short-term jobs.

Foreigners were acutely aware of the dominant narrative, and allegation, that they were taking jobs away from locals in South Africa, a refrain we hear with every outbreak of xenophobic violence (Everatt 2011; Landau, Ramjathan-Keogh, and Singh 2005). The foreigners I spoke with on the roadside described the situation somewhat differently. They insisted that locals were 'lazy' because, unlike them, they were not actively searching for work. Some scholars have suggested that foreigners denigration of locals as lazy is part of a broader strategy to warrant, and reinforce, employers preference for hiring them, especially in construction, gardening and domestic work (Sterken 2010). A number of the men I met on the roadside emphasised that locals were 'choosing their working' whereas foreigners, as Brian put it, 'don't have choice [and] accept everything'. A common narrative was that South Africans were unwilling to do the 'tough jobs' and would 'never work for R80 [a day]'. This account, as we saw in the introduction, was often substantiated in my conversations with young South Africans. In one instance, a young man vowed that he would never be seen 'begging' for work on the roadside.

The roadside pick-up point is perhaps the clearest example of the informalisation of the formal labour market. It provides a unique window into the irregularity and precariousness that typifies most low-paid and low-quality jobs in the surrounding areas. It is significant that those who actively seek out these jobs are, besides a few exceptions, overwhelmingly immigrants – many of whom lack papers to work in the country legally.

Day labourers are employed according to vacillations in demand and have no guarantee of when they will next find work, or for that matter, how much they will earn. These workers exchange their labour for a wage but without any of the stability and security associated with more permanent work. The roadside is characterised by shallow and impersonal relations between unequals, and thus represents a highly capitalist relation. It is vital to stress that these roadside jobs are also highly racialised and in many cases involve being subservient to white people. Those who depend on these jobs do so out of necessity and because they have few other alternatives. Doing so involves a persistent feeling of uncertainty and the colonisation of one's time due to the endless search for work. It is the highly unequal structure of this mode of dependence, and its associated desperation, that underpins local youth's rejection of it. Urban youth's response to the intolerability of low-paid jobs typically took one of two forms: an investment in local community and political work or an engagement in the street economy. It is the latter where we now turn.

Hustling on the street

Street corners, often near a tavern or car wash stand, provide popular gathering places for groups of young men outside of wage employment. These spaces provide a place for men to congregate to talk, smoke *dagga* (marijuana), gamble, pass time, and make a living. Unlike the roadside, men assemble here in the mid-morning when those with, or searching for, paid work have long left. The men who occupy these spots on a regular basis are more likely to be established residents who live on the same street or in a neighbouring section of the settlement. The street corner has long been associated with youth gangs, criminality and violence in urban South Africa (Glaser 1998; Mokwena 1991). Consequently, the men who occupy these spaces are often suspected of making money through ‘short cuts’ involving criminal or illicit activities as well as being condemned for being ‘lazy’ or ‘just sitting’ - a common phrase used to depict those who are seen to be failing to look for work or finding ways to create it.

The road that borders Zandspruit’s taxi rank is home to a number of informal car wash stands operated by young men. It is here where I first met Khenzo. Aged thirty-two, Khenzo is short and slim and never without his navy blue *Pantsula*¹⁶ hat. Khenzo grew up in a small town in Limpopo province and, like many others, came to Zandspruit in the hope of finding work and a better life. For close to a decade, Khenzo hopped between various short-term, low-paying jobs before starting his car wash business

¹⁶ *Pantsula* is both the name of a dance form, type of music and ‘style’ that originated in the black townships during apartheid.

‘fulltime’. In fact, Khenzo was the first person to set up a car wash stand on the stretch of road opposite the taxi rank. That was 2010. He has not worked a day outside of the settlement since and makes the bulk of his livelihood washing cars and selling drugs (primarily marijuana).

Khenzo co-runs the car wash stand with Oscar (age 28) who has lived in Zandspruit for over a decade. Khenzo and Oscar begin their days in the mid-morning after the taxi drivers’ return from their early morning commutes. During the week, minibus taxis – that transport the majority of residents in and out of townships and informal settlements – make up the bulk of their clients. On the weekends, Motswako patrons and churchgoers from outside provide another significant source of business. It is the local taxis, however, that are their bread and butter. This works because the taxi bosses (who own the taxis) expect their vehicles to be washed on a daily basis; providing washers like Khenzo and Oscar with a relatively stable source of income. In 2015, Khenzo charged R60 per taxi and made between R300-R400 (\$20-\$30) a day. In addition to the money he made selling drugs, he not only had a fairly steady source of income but made significantly more than he could in the types of job available to him in the formal economy.



Figure 7: Stretch of road with car wash stands

In theory, all one needs to set-up a car wash business in a place like Zandspruit is access to urban space and water, a few buckets, and some soap and old rags. However, running a car wash stand is not that simple. It is, in fact, extremely difficult to access a spot on this strip of road because of its nearness to the (recently upgraded) taxi rank and Motswako. Khenzo derives his ‘right’ to operate here through his local residence, his status as someone who has lived in the area (and operated his business) for a long time, and complex forms of local recognition. He maintains his ‘right’ to operate here through various forms of monetary exchange. Let me give an example. Despite the municipality officially owning the road and the land on either side, Khenzo pays a fee every few months to a local street committee who control this territory and allocate the open land. As noted by Neves and du Toit (2012, 137–38), being able to negotiate these informal governance structures is a critical part of successfully operating in the informal economy. To solidify his *de facto* proprietorship of this stretch of road,

Khenzo rents a shack to live in directly opposite his business. This proximity also blurs any distinction between work and home and ‘work-time’ and ‘leisure-time’. Viewed from Khenzo’s perspective it is precisely this blurring of both temporal and spatial boundaries that strengthens his position within the street economy. The social autonomy he derives from controlling his time and day enables him to cultivate and maintain his social relations and legitimacy on the street 24/7.

The car wash stand cannot be viewed as a stand-alone business or enterprise. It is perhaps more accurate to describe it as a hub for a diverse range of economic activities, transactions, exchanges and everyday forms of sharing. It is also a space of male sociality and mutual sharing much like the barber shops Brad Weiss describes in Arusha, Tanzania (Weiss 2002) and the conversational groups known as *fadas* in Niger (Masquelier 2013). On any given day there are a number of taxi drivers, neighbours, and a loose network of peers who spend the day, or part of it, sitting under the torn shade cloth opposite Khenzo’s shack. It was common for the men gathered to be gambling or sharing a cigarette, some beer, and occasionally a plate of food. Most of the men I met here had not finished school, a number had had a phase in criminal activity, and nearly all lacked the necessary qualifications, or experience, to attain the kinds of wage jobs they considered acceptable or worth it. Consequently, most of the men I met at Khenzo’s car wash stand

made their money ‘hustling’ in a specific niche of the informal economy¹⁷, although few limited themselves to any one activity.

Over time, I learned more about the livelihoods of some of the regulars at the car wash stand. Sandile, for instance, made a living wiring illegal connections and gambling¹⁸. Neo worked sporadically as a broker at the Randburg licensing department. He received a cut from the bribes people paid to speed up the process of getting their drivers license. While Neo sometimes ‘got lucky’ and made a quick buck brokering a deal he did not have ‘guaranteed work’, as he put it, or, like Khenzo, a durable source of income in the informal economy. Likewise, Tebogo made a living selling labelled clothes and shoes out of a rucksack and ‘making plans through people’, as he often put it, in response to my questions about the source of his money. Tebogo never specified what these ‘plans’ involved. I learned

¹⁷ There is an extensive literature on these practices of ‘street hustling’ or ‘zigzagging’ in Zimbabwe (J. L. Jones 2010), Ethiopia (Di Nunzio 2012), Kenya (Thieme 2018), the Chad Basin (Roitman 2004), Guinea-Bissau (Vigh 2006), India (Jeffrey 2010a), and Cote d’Ivoire (Newell 2012). These include youth operating as brokers in local patron-client networks (Dawson 2014b; Jeffrey and Young 2012; Vigh 2006), as minibus touts and street tourist guides (Di Nunzio 2012), and in illegal enterprises such as phone fraud, forgery and dealing in stolen goods (J. L. Jones 2010; Newell 2012).

¹⁸ Gambling was often referenced as one of the main sources of income for men (and women) without wage work. While some young men gambled on the odd occasion, or more as a leisure activity, others gambled everyday, as if it were a job, and saw it as their primary source of income. Krige (2011b) and Van Wyk (2012) show that gambling has long been regarded as a ‘business’ and a ‘livelihood strategy’ and, importantly for my argument, a means to dodge manual labour. Sandile played dice (a popular gambling game) at a spot further up the street from Khenzo’s car wash stand. Young men played with small sums of money during the week and cashed in over the weekends, especially after payday, when local residents but also people who live outside of the settlement come to Zandspruit to socialise and gamble. On a number of occasions I got wind of people making a few thousand rand, and sometimes substantially more. It was of course very hard to verify this information.

from my observations and conversations with him that his ‘plans’ included haggling residents for money and pocketing small sums from brokering a deal or running errands. Others made money from renting shacks and engaging in petty crime. Some of these men told me they had been engaged in more serious criminal activity (including car-jacking and house robberies) in the past but none admitted to doing so any longer. In truth, it is impossible to be sure because this information was rarely given out freely.

Instead of focusing on any one economic activity here, I want to focus on the informal peer networks that underpin these alternative economies and modes of provisioning. The relationship between Khenzo, Oscar and many of their peers were premised on an understanding of flexible reciprocity whereby those who currently had money, or where employed in some form, would help out those who did not. These networks of support offered an informal kind of ‘insurance’, as one of my interlocutors put it, but also networks of non-market relations that provided alternative avenues to pocket cash. These forms of mutual sharing and exchange were underpinned by divergent motivations. As noted by Tim Gibbs recently, citing Keith Hart’s observation, it is virtually impossible to accumulate wealth (especially in the informal economy) without creating animosities (Gibbs 2014, 434). This is especially the case in a context of shrinking work opportunities and acute inequalities like South Africa. Khenzo shared this concern with me on more than one occasion. ‘South Africans have got jealousy’, he told me, explaining the danger of accumulating too much wealth without being seen to share it. Consequently, Khenzo understood his participation in these everyday forms of exchange and sharing as essential to his ability to continue making a living in the informal economy.

The flexibility (and frailty) of these relations became especially apparent to me when one of Khenzo's most regular customers, a taxi driver by the name of Xolani, lost his main source of income overnight. I met Xolani outside Khenzo's shack in 2015 after he recently became unemployed. The owner of his taxi had taken the vehicle to his hometown in the Eastern Cape without any warning. Xolani was without a taxi to drive for three months. During this period, he spent most of his time hanging out at the car wash stand with Khenzo and Oscar. By interacting on the street corner Xolani not only benefitted from everyday forms of sharing but also learned about various opportunities to make a quick buck. As other scholars have noted, being able to 'catch "business"' (Di Nunzio 2012, 440) in the street economy often depends on being 'in the right place at the right time' (J. L. Jones 2010, 292) to encounter an opportunity. Over the three month period, Xolani made money through small loans and gifts from helping Khenzo wash taxis, driving a peer's taxi when he could convince one to take a day off, and by helping mediate deals between local drug dealers and taxi bosses (who have a long historical connection with dagga smuggling (Gibbs 2014, 446)).

On Fridays and Saturdays, it was common for Oscar and Khenzo (and anyone else helping them out) to wash a handful of cars together and use the money they made to buy a crate of beers to share. Drinking alcohol is an integral part of these relationships and the main leisure activity. Buying and sharing alcohol provided an important way for men to cement friendships but also practice reciprocity much like the young men Daniel Mains (2013)

describes in Jimma, Ethiopia. To the extent that these relationships were flexible, they were also the source of tension and conflict. Khenzo often complained to me about some of his friends who hung around the car wash stand and expected him to buy them meals and drinks without ever reciprocating. If someone petitioned for money too explicitly, on too many occasions, or without reciprocal efforts in kind or cash, they risked being side-lined or cut off from these relations of inter-dependence altogether. Equally, if Khenzo did not participate in this economy of reciprocal exchange that included paying 'fees' to the local street committee, 'rent' to his landlord, and various 'gifts' to a much wider and looser network of peers, neighbours, and customers, he risked his own livelihood.

The car wash stand is only one niche within a much larger township economy. I have focused on it for two reasons. First, it illustrates the importance of local networks to the organisation of territory and the processes of inclusion and exclusion within the informal economy. Second, it reveals the interdependencies between various economic activities, transactions, and everyday forms of sharing (i.e. the relations between taxi bosses, drivers and washers). It is important to note that most of the young men I met at the car wash stand saw little benefit in engaging in petty trade or micro-businesses that were seen to provide, much like the roadside jobs, no more than a hand-to-mouth existence. Instead, they sought to carve out space for themselves in the more lucrative avenues of the township economy or opportunities to make a quick buck.

The dense social relations young men forge on the street are integral to operating in the informal economy. To take advantage of the more lucrative niches requires horizontal networks as well as the capacity to negotiate multiple, often competing, informal governance structures and local orders. This is apparent in the local street committees who extract fees from business owners and residents who want to build new shacks in their yards. I want to emphasise that while the informal economy provides some young men with a greater degree of autonomy and independence from the hierarchical relations of wage labour, these same livelihoods are constituted by complex inter-dependencies that are not all positive or collaborative, nor are they free of hierarchies. Authority and hierarchy in Zandspruit stem from accumulated influence that often involves violence, intimidation and blackmail. The power relations that structure access to opportunities in the informal economy will be discussed more fully in Chapter Four. We now turn to the final sketch of a youth-run NGO office that also involves the negotiation of dense local relations.

Voluntary labour and political brokerage

Zandspruit Youth Forum (ZYF)¹⁹ is a youth-run NGO started by a group of young people in Zandspruit. The founders started it with a vision to positively contribute to the development of their community with a focus on widening access to educational and economic opportunities for local youth. In 2015, when I began attending their weekly meetings, the organisation had fifty official members who had paid the R20 (\$1.5) annual

¹⁹ This is a pseudonym.

fee and over 550 followers on Facebook. The organisation operated from an off-white prefab container situated behind the clinic in 'transit camp'. It was commonly referred to as 'the office'. A sign on the door read: opening hours: 9 am to 4 pm with weekly meetings on Thursdays at 4 pm. Inside, a worn-out couch sat in the right-hand corner next to a large pine desk full of government brochures and pamphlets on drug addiction, safe sex, and writing a curriculum vitae (CV). Three old computers lined the opposite wall where youth 'volunteers' watched movies, listened to music, and occasionally typed up their CVs or business proposals.

The structure and rhythm of the office mirrored that of a work place: opening at nine and closing at four. The chairperson (Collen) and secretary (Sibongile) of the organisation were in the office most days and attempted to create a positive and affirming atmosphere. Concerned about the consequences of unemployment, they actively encouraged young people to come to the office. Their aim was to prevent youth from what they saw as the two other alternatives: staying at home 'doing nothing' or getting engaged in 'short cuts' in the street economy. The NGO had developed a diverse membership in terms of gender and age with members ranging from age eighteen to forty. Most of the 'volunteers' who frequent the office during the week were, unlike the street corner youth, recent school leavers and often first-time job seekers. They were not only younger but had, nearly always, completed secondary school. The office provided these young men and women with a structured environment to pass time, hang out, build friendships, and get information about work and funding opportunities. At lunchtime, everyone in the office contributed money to buy the ingredients for *ikota*: a quarter loaf (*kota*) of bread hollowed out and

filled with fried chips, cheese, and *atchar* (a spicy condiment made from pickled green mango); and on special occasions (or when they had extra money) – a fried egg and meat. These everyday forms of sharing extended into other realms. ‘Volunteers’ often shared cell phone data to download, upload and share photos on Facebook and WhatsApp, loaned money to each other, and shared information about jobs and training opportunities.



Figure 8: Youth practicing a dance outside the youth-NGO office

I got to know the secretary of the organisation, Sibongile, very well. He first got involved in local politics and community work through his involvement in party politics. In 2011, when we first met, Sibongile had been instrumental in rebooting the local ANC youth league. Shortly afterwards, he was elected the deputy secretary of the league, and subsequently onto the local ward committee: a formal local government structure meant to

mediate between residents and the state. In July 2011, shortly after Sibongile's appointment onto the committee, he told me his main goal was to help young people in the community find work opportunities. He understood the local state to be an important source of work and training opportunities and wanted to ensure local youth benefited. He also had bigger political aspirations. In 2015, he quit a full-time job at a call centre to devote more of his time to community and political work. He saw his 'volunteer' work with ZYF as vital to building the necessary social capital to stand for the local councilor position in the 2016 local elections.

The ZYF adopts the language of 'participatory development' and sees itself as a bridge between the community and the government. It seeks to provide a platform for youth participation and volunteerism with the stated aim of transforming Zandspruit into a 'vibrant and self-sufficient community'. The leadership of the NGO went to great lengths to emphasise the organisation's non-partisan identity. But with many of the executive committee active in the local ANC branch, and an organisational mandate to broker the relationship between the community and various arms of the local and provincial state, the lines between volunteerism, activism, business and politics are frequently blurred. The lines between the NGO, the government, and the ANC were muddled further when the organisation took over responsibility for issuing letters of proof of residence for the inhabitants of Zandspruit. The demand for these letters is endless due to the density and flux of people in and out of the area and the frequency with which residents need these letters to open bank accounts or store cards, obtain loans, take out phone contracts, and register for social grants. Officially this service is the responsibility of the local councilor. In

Zandspruit, however, there is a tradition of it being devolved to community structures that have typically charged a fee for what should be a free government service. This practice has caused much commotion in the past. Seeking to avoid scandal, ZYF decided not to charge residents for these letters but rather encourage residents to make a donation that went towards buying lunch for the ‘volunteers’ in the office.

NGOs like ZYF offer local youth more than lunch and an economic livelihood. ZYF promotes ‘voluntary labour’ as a way for young people to help the community while also gaining experience, skills and opportunities to advance their search for jobs or prospects of becoming entrepreneurs (Prince and Brown 2016, 2,12). The organisation provides opportunities for young people to get involved, and take on leadership roles, in organising community events that include youth workshops, sports days, and cleaning campaigns. During my fieldwork, the funding for these events came typically from government initiatives or larger NGOs. The rise and professionalisation of voluntarism has been described by scholars as a response to widening unemployment and the withdrawal of the state in Africa (Prince and Brown 2016, 2, 12,18) and elsewhere (Muehlebach 2012). These processes can be seen as part of a wider process of ‘NGO-ization’ (referring to their increasing formalisation and bureaucratisation) of local organisations, politics and social movements under neoliberal conditions (Choudry and Kapoor 2013; J. L. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

The NGO is also a powerful conduit for youth's aspirations for social mobility and advancement. The youth I met in the NGO office regularly underscored their productivity (via socially valuable) voluntary work and their patience to wait for a 'proper' job. One day while sitting in the office I overheard a man by the name of Nelson (age 19) distinguish himself from 'lazy youth' who 'adapt to the mentality [of] this side' by engaging in 'short cuts' to attain wealth. Nelson hoped that by volunteering he was acquiring skills that would make him more employable and the social connections needed to have a better shot at securing salaried work. Like many youth in the office, he wanted to find a 'good' job working for the government or a private company in the formal sector. Nelson was not alone, or incorrect, for thinking a government job was a more secure route to a middle-class lifestyle. Government is not only one of the biggest employers in the country but it pays (on the whole) comparably more (Kerr and Wittenberg 2017). But while government employment was valued highly, the youth at the office knew their chance of ever accessing these jobs was slim. Many, in fact, saw greater prospects in starting a business or NGO of their own.

The office bombarded youth with messages about entrepreneurship. A local ANC youth leader summed up this viewpoint at a government-funded youth *imbizo*.²⁰ Looking out over the young people gathered outside the local primary school, he told them not to wait for jobs but to rather start their own businesses. 'Your future is in your hands, not government's hands', he

²⁰ A Zulu word for an assembly, gathering or forum for discussion.

shouted from the podium. These sorts of self-help discourses were pervasive amongst those in the youth-NGO office. Entrepreneurship was not only upheld as a form of self-expression, and a mechanism for social advancement, but, much like volunteering, as a way to also better the community.

In 2015, when I was regularly in and out of the office, there was much talk about the Gauteng provincial government's Township Economy Revitalisation Strategy. Sibongile (ZYF's secretary) was well versed in this initiative that sought to use state procurement to support township economies and, in particular, young, black township entrepreneurs (Govender 2017). In early 2016, a few months away from the local elections, city officials held a number of meetings in the community to explain how local cooperatives and businesses could benefit from 'work packages' under the Jozi@Work scheme. A 'work package' is effectively a mini-project the government awards to small, community businesses instead of larger contractors (Dludla 2014). The official described the program as 'empowering' local communities to respond to problems in their own communities while 'being paid for doing it'. Sibongile lauded the government's attempt to direct public sector procurement spending to local township businesses. He saw the program as offering youth opportunities to, as he put it, 'meet the government half way' instead of 'waiting for the government to give us jobs'. He saw himself as leading the way having already registered a cooperative and construction business himself. Sibongile estimated he could profit from these smaller work packages while also eyeing larger government contracts following the much-promised (yet elusive) infrastructural and housing developments. Other youth were more

cynical. One young man I got to know from the office told me, in no uncertain terms, that the government wanted people to register cooperatives (that require five or more members) to inflate employment figures for electioneering purposes. Another insisted that the project was effectively a way to cut costs by outsourcing various local-government functions, including waste removal and garden maintenance, to community co-ops to avoid a contractual relationship (and the additional costs) of hiring workers directly.²¹

In reality, the employment and funding opportunities available through the NGO were mostly limited to once-off government-sponsored events and initiatives. While many of the youth volunteers I met in the office struggled to find work or start an enterprise of their own, a significant number did find some success. Two youth got employed in the local community, one at the local school and another as a driver for a local NGO. Others got entry-level jobs including working in retail and in a call centre. Those in leadership positions in the NGO often downplayed the material benefits of this community work and emphasised their longer-term political or collective goals. But as Prince and Brown have argued: ‘the political value of volunteerism cannot be separated from its economic value’(2016, 23). Sibongile’s membership and participation in the NGO, and the local ANC branch, did not provide him with anything like the predictability of a

²¹ The South African Municipal Workers’ Union (SAMWU) has accused municipalities for ‘trying to fragment unions and workers’ unity in the sector by outsourcing municipal services through the use of cooperatives’ with workers losing benefits and other conditions of employment (SAMWU 2015).

monthly wage. It did, however, provide him with opportunities for material support. He met his daily needs through small donations from people in the community and various political structures who supported his vision. He also received the occasional stipend or allowance from attending external meetings and conferences. Sibongile, however, saw his involvement in local political and community structures as a long-term project and strategy to 'get recognised' by regional and provincial ANC structures. He knew very well that his connections to politicians, government officials, and various NGOs, were critical to him having any real chance at getting a better-paying job, a government tender for one of his registered businesses, or funding for his various community projects.

Local NGOs, like ZYF, play an important role in brokering the relationships between different 'outside' actors (NGOs, politicians, and government officials) and the resources they bring with them. They also provide one of the main sites for local residents, and youth in particular, to build up the kinds of relationships, networks, and contacts that are necessary (but no guarantee) for acquiring better-paying work or benefiting from various government projects and initiatives. The brokerage work of an NGO like ZYF takes many different forms. This ranges from assisting local youth to find jobs through personal connections and referrals to providing a platform, especially for more politically astute youth, to build connections with better-resourced NGOs as well as business owners and politicians in the hope of accessing patronage. That many youth saw attaining a government tender as the only real way to succeed in business reveals that youth's aspiration to be their own boss is, in fact, closely tied to complex relations of dependence that involve powerful others. There is a lot of overlap

between the forms of ‘volunteering’ or ‘brokerage’ work I have described here and what Craig Jeffrey (2010a) calls ‘political entrepreneurship’. To view the kinds of voluntary and brokerage work I’ve been describing as a form of ‘political entrepreneurship’ allows us to see it, much like ‘hustling’, as a mode of dependence that is not only woven into complex local relations of power and patronage but one that also creates profound forms of inter-dependence and obligation.

My aim in presenting these three idealised sketches was to draw attention to some of the different kinds of dependencies, and forms of social membership, in operation in Zandspruit. The sketch of the roadside presented us with immigrants who depend upon highly insecure, unequal, and more contractual modes of provisioning. These roadside jobs are nearly always for a limited period of time, scantily paid, highly racialised, and include none of the benefits or security associated with better paying work. I contrasted this with a sketch of a car wash stand to highlight the dense relations and horizontal networks that are integral to the economic activities available to local youth in the township economy. Unlike the jobs available from the roadside, ‘hustling’ depends on one’s ability to navigate and negotiate a web of local relationships, ties, claims, and power structures. Finally, I presented the NGO office as a site where youth seek out membership in various community and political structures that are vital to benefitting from, and making claim to, resources from outside actors that include larger NGOs and the state. These relations of dependence are not contractual but highly versatile and negotiable, nor, as I have shown, are they free of hierarchies or authority. They do, however, enable a precarious

in-dependence from the most intolerable jobs at the bottom-end of the urban labour market.

The roadside, car washstand, and NGO represent different networks of relationality and modes of dependence within a single field of action. While these different modes of provision might map onto slightly differently sociological categories and be socially embedded differently, they are nonetheless abstractions or idealised versions to demonstrate the different kinds of socioeconomic life on offer in Zandspruit. In reality, these forms of provisioning, and the relationships involved, are not so cut and dried. Many youth move between, straddle, or combine different modes and relations of dependence at any one point in time. It was not uncommon for youth in the street economy to also be dabbling in local politics, or likewise for youth in the local NGO to also be involved in wiring illegal connections, or making money via gambling or as a moneylender. Moreover, these activities were by no means the preserve of those who make a living autonomous from wage labour.

If one takes a longer-term perspective it becomes clear that youth, at different points in their lives, and in response to shifting circumstances, not only move between jobs but also between different sectors of the economy, in a similar fashion to Rodger's (2009) account of a Nicaraguan youth gang member turned illegal drug dealer turned legal entrepreneur. It is also impossible to ignore that these different modes of dependence were more or less accessible, and acceptable, to different individuals and social groups. In the following section, and the chapter that follows, I explore how and why

that is. We begin, in the section that follows, with a discussion of local youth's own valuations to shed light on the dynamics of incorporation; and demonstrate the social, moral and political stakes involved in young people's economic decisions.

Evaluating and ranking dependencies

Over the course of my fieldwork, nearly all the young men I got to know, both in the NGO office and on the street corners, were not working in the traditional sense, at least not for long periods. Most, if not at the time we met then some time before, had worked intermittently in unrelated low-paying jobs as private security guards, cashiers, golf caddies, petrol attendants, and the like. Importantly, these same young men actively avoid many of the lowest-paying jobs in the area, especially the most arduous jobs associated with the roadside. The few who had worked in construction, for example, typically did so for a short period, without much commitment, and were hesitant for people to find out. For example: after arriving in Johannesburg, Xolani (the taxi driver I met at Khenzo's taxi stand) found a job on a large construction site that became an up-market housing estate. He did this job grudgingly and within three months had found himself a job as a golf caddy – a job he had for over two years. Tebogo, who also spent a great deal of time at the car wash stand, had done a few short stints in retail and construction in-between long stints of unemployment. Likewise, Sibongile, prior to working at a call centre (the job he left to 'volunteer' in the NGO full time) had worked for another local NGO, and before that as a petrol attendant.

Work histories with thirty youth, in addition to the survey I conducted, corroborate this overall picture of high levels of flux and unpredictability in youth's labour market experiences, what economists call 'churn'. The survey I conducted provided a number of other important insights. First, it confirmed that the most common jobs youth held, as indicated above, were nearly always in the service sector: jobs they evaluated hierarchically with manual labour jobs at the very bottom, followed by jobs in hospitality and contract cleaning, and lastly (but only slightly superior) jobs in private security and retail. These jobs were all nonetheless disparaged for the low pay, long hours, exploitative work conditions, and minimal job security. It was atypical for youth to stay in a job for longer than a year, with many in jobs for much shorter periods of time. In many instances this was because of the short-term nature of the contract (if, indeed, they had a contract at all), or because they had been laid off. In a surprising number of cases, however, the loss of a job was due to the person quitting or abandoning the job, in most cases without any guarantee of another. The reason for the high levels of churn, and great dissatisfaction many youth experienced *in* jobs, is where we turn next.

Disdain for low-wage work

'You don't look for a job that is going to drain you'

While there are important socio-economic differences between the young men I got to know in Zandspruit (discussed further in Chapter Four), there was significant uniformity in the factors that undergird their rejection of the lowest-paying jobs. The reasons young men reject certain jobs became especially apparent during a conversation I had with a young man named

Kabelo. Kabelo is in his early thirties, lives with his mother (and two school-going nephews – the children of his deceased sister) in a two-room shack, and, at the time of my fieldwork, did some ad-hoc work for a local NGO that paid him a small stipend. In the five years prior he had worked on and off in a number of retail jobs in-between long spells of unemployment. One of these jobs was as a sales representative in a store selling homewares and appliances: a job he walked away from after seven months. When I asked why he had decided to leave this job, he responded: ‘you don’t just want to work and waste your time. You want to work and see the benefits of working’. ‘You know’, he said pausing, ‘[in these jobs] I lose out on my weekends, [and] my personal time. I want a job that will be flexible with my life and my decisions that I’m taking’. I want to draw attention to Kabelo’s description of his sales job as a ‘waste of time’. From his point of view, the job was unworkable primarily because it failed to offer him any of the social benefits, job security, and opportunities for progression he expected from a job in the formal sector. Important here is that the job was a commission-based contract with no guaranteed minimum pay. It also required him to work on weekends and public holidays. Later in our conversation he described the futility of staying in a job like this:

If I’m not going to get an opportunity to get a house from that job, you know what I mean. What’s the point in me sticking to a job that’s not going to help me get a secure roof over my head.

Accounts like Kabelo’s were common in young men’s work histories. Eric (age 32), who also grew up in Zandspruit and lives with his mother, echoed a similar disenchantment with many of the jobs he had had in the past. In a conversation about why he had left his last job at a major supermarket, he explained that the main reason stemmed from his employer’s failure to keep

his word and convert his short-term contract (after the three-month probation period) into a permanent position. The practice, I came to learn, is widespread – especially in retail jobs.

Some people [referring to his old boss] tend to undermine you [and] so you feel you've been cheated. They promise you money, to give you this amount for this period, to be on probation, and then after this time [they] say I'll pay you this much. When this time comes that person doesn't. They run away from those promises.

We can see from Eric's reasoning that working in a low-paid job was not only an insecure existence but also often a difficult and belittling one. A number of the youth I spoke with described experiences of racial abuse and exploitation at their place of work. It was these experiences that made youth feel, in Eric's words, 'undermined' and 'cheated'. But, like Kabelo, Eric's decision to leave this job (and others before it) only makes sense when one considers the expectations (and social obligations I discuss further in Chapter Five) youth associate with employment in the formal economy. As Hylton White (2011, 12) points out, youth like Eric did not look to a job as a means to attain sustenance at a very basic level. Eric obtained this through his relationships with kin and peers and from the money he made renting shacks and running a small IT business (that helps local residents type up their CVs and print or photocopy documents) from his mother's house. Rather, he evaluated a paid job for its capacity to provide the conditions for personal maturation and social mobility (White 2011). 'When you look for a job', Eric told me, 'you don't look for a job that is going to drain you. You need a job that is going to build you so you will have a future tomorrow'. This statement was both a declaration of his refusal to take up manual labour where, as he put it, you 'sweat and come home stinky' and an assertion of

his desire for an ‘office job.’ Moreover, such statements avowed his expectation that a job provide the necessary resources to meet his social obligations and aspirations. Crucially, his reluctance to take up work that ‘drains you’ had as much to do with the physical exertion involved as it did with the social pressure youth felt to take care of their families (involving a different, but very real, kind of social depletion). Importantly, as will become clear in later chapters, this burden was especially acute among those in salaried work (however short-term or insecure) compared to those who made their money hustling on the street, or through alternative avenues. Eric summed it up as follows:

Anything [that pays] less than R4500 (\$320) is draining, as I won’t be able to do the things I want. I have a family and there are the things I want to do. I want to go back to school and finish matric. I want to get married and pay *ilobola* [bridewealth]. All those kinds of things you want to do in your life.

Like the youth Masquelier (2013) describes in Niger, local youth like Eric evaluate a job against its ability to fulfil certain expectations of male success including attaining financial independence, founding one’s own household, and forms of distribution and consumption. What is striking is that the kind of job Eric is describing is one that is available to a shrinking minority of people in South Africa, and maybe only a handful of people youth like Eric know. It is equally important to note that youth like Eric are not ‘waiting’ around for one of these jobs. They are acutely aware that, without a matric certificate or further education, their chances of finding such work are slim. Instead, Eric and many others spent much of their time strategizing ways to make money informally without a boss. Local youth’s scorn for low wage work is not simply about the failure of these jobs to provide the conditions for social maturation and advancement. It also has much to do with the

expectations of citizenship and the dynamics of social differentiation within Zandspruit.

'Knowing what you stand for': Expectations of citizenship

A common theme in youth's explanations for why they were unemployed or reluctant to take up the available jobs involved a widely shared disdain towards foreign immigrants. This was not the worn-out narrative of foreigners 'taking' jobs from locals. Foreigners were instead faulted for being 'desperate' in their acceptance of 'any job' – something I was told repeatedly South Africans did not do. Moreover, foreigners were seen to be willing to settle for wages beneath the already-low wages of many workers in South Africa. 'They [foreigners] can work just to survive [but] South Africans they don't take any job', said Senosi during a conversation in the NGO office one day. South Africans, he insisted, work for 'different things'. When I asked Senosi what he meant by this, he first pointed to disparities in living arrangements and food consumption: 'I've seen how they [foreigners] live', he said. 'They share a small room, like 4x4 metres, and 8 in a room. They will eat cabbage and potatoes with *pap* [coarsely ground maize] only'. 'No meat', he exclaimed. 'As a South African you cannot live by *pap* and potatoes from Monday to Sunday', he continued. 'As a South African', he said again, 'I know I've got this to do, a social life, a life to live at home'.

Senosi allows us to appreciate that local youth's rejection of hand-to-mouth jobs and their assertion that they 'know what they stand for', as Senosi put it, are tied to widely held expectations and aspirations promised by democracy with fair compensation deemed a 'right' of citizenship. Jason

Hickel's (2014, 21) observation that South Africans refuse to celebrate foreign immigrants – who in exemplifying the 'ideal neoliberal subject' are seen to be 'devoid of the characteristics that make a person fully human' – holds equally well in Zandspruit.

In many of my conversations, South African men not only distinguished themselves from foreigners on the basis of the jobs they were or were not prepared to do but also chided foreigners for their willingness to work for wages far below a liveable wage. The issue here was less about the specific jobs immigrants were taking – jobs local youth for the most part rejected. Their primary issue concerned the wider impact of immigration on the economy. This often presented itself in a tendency to conflate increased immigration with the informalisation of the economy and the deterioration of employment conditions. The presence of large numbers of undocumented immigrants was understood to be responsible for driving down wages. There is evidence this is happening in some of the most precarious sectors of the economy: agriculture, hospitality and private security (Mncwango et al. 2016; Mncwango 2016). Tsoanelo (age 28) told me that foreigners' eagerness to accept 'any job' was wrong because it 'robbed locals of a decent life'. In the same conversation, he contended that foreigners' willingness to take up whatever work they can find was 'taking us back to the system of Buntu [apartheid]' where a black man, no matter how hard he works, takes home a salary incapable of sustaining his family.

A report by the Migration for Work Research Consortium (MiWOrc) notes the unique situation in South Africa where international migrants have a

higher probability of being employed than locals (Budlender and Fauvelle-Aymar 2014). Similarly, it is not a coincidence that the majority of foreigners work in the lowest-paying sectors of the economy where trade unions are all but absent and contracts or benefits non-existent. In fact, the relative ease with which foreigners find employment in these low-end jobs is contrasted with the severe barriers to entry they experience in the public sector and industries that are more unionised (Fakir 2014). The fact that more foreigners are employed in these ‘precarious jobs’ than locals is, as Saliem Fakir observes: ‘not only the result of the immigrant’s initiative, but also due to inherent bias in the South African economy’. Ethnographies of township life during apartheid reveal that urban labour was widely regarded as ‘cheeky’ and ‘unreliable’ with employers preferring to hire migrants who were cheaper, and more submissive and respectful (Glaser 2000, 32–33; Posel 1991, 17, 179; M. Wilson and Mafeje 1963, 23–25). The long established preference for foreign labour is one of the most noticeable continuities between apartheid and now. The only difference, as Fakir (2014) notes, is that migrants come primarily from outside of the country whereas during apartheid much migrant labour came from within. The preference for employing immigrants is tied to the reduced likelihood of them making wage demands or going on strike.

I cannot tackle the relationship between immigration and the informalisation of the labour market in any detail here. Other research suggests that the tendency to conflate immigration with deteriorating employment conditions and declining wages is not groundless (Blaauw, Pretorius, and Schenck 2016). Survey data on day labourers between 2004 and 2015 in the City of Tshwane shows that the day labourer market, in terms of the number of

people employed, has grown exponentially. There has also been a substantial increase (from 12% to 55%) in the foreign component of the day labourer market and a decrease in earnings for both foreign and South African labourers over the same period (Blaauw, Pretorius, and Schenck 2016). The disenchantment around increased immigration and the increasing precariousness of wage employment reveals the conflation of two interconnected processes. It is not clear what the exact relationship is between these social processes. What is plain is that immigrants appear to be some of the biggest winners of the processes of informalisation and perhaps the local non-migrants the biggest losers.

In most of my conversations about the presence of foreigners in the economy, the power of capital and their vested interests in the rise of temporary and casual employment was obscured. Not for Lindokhule, however, who worked at one of the main security companies that operate in the surrounding suburbs. He had a more nuanced view. While Lindokhule begrudged foreigners for their readiness to be exploited he was especially scathing of the bosses in private security companies. He accused them of 'robbing workers of the little money they make' by hiring guards on 'independent contracts' to by-pass the minimum employment benefits and protections (irrespective of the workers' nationality). A year before our conversation the labour court decried these independent contracts a 'sham to avoid compliance' that exploited vulnerable security guards 'desperate to work' (Chauke 2014). Lindokhule recognised that his low wage and lack of job security had less to do with foreigners and more to do with his bosses who preferred hiring undocumented migrants who could not demand their rights or resort to legal protection (Sefalafala and Webster 2013). In a sense,

Lindokhule helps us to see that the disdain for foreign nationals cannot be separated from widespread discontent with the casualisation of labour in the post-apartheid period and the persistence of social and racial inequalities in the workplace.

Refusing to 'make someone else rich': inequality and racial antagonism

Race, inequality, and discrimination were a persistent theme in young people's work histories and a common reason they ditched jobs. It was in the workplace that many youth came face to face with the astounding gap between the haves and the have-nots. In 2015, a young man by the name of Tsoanelo recounted his reason for leaving his job at a plastic factory in a nearby industrial park. 'I worked my butt off for those three years', he said visibly embittered. 'I don't know how much I brought into that company but I brought a lot of money'. As our conversation continued he explained how despite being promised a promotion when a suitable position became available it was given to a more junior white employee. 'I quit', he said, because 'I didn't see myself going forward' or 'becoming something' in the firm. His experience working for this company had brought him to the conclusion that white bosses 'use' black people to make them rich without caring about their well-being. 'They [white people] want to keep blacks at the bottom of the ladder and whites at the top', he insisted. Tsoanelo asserted that he would not stay in a job that 'makes someone else rich' when he was not given an opportunity to progress. 'I don't believe I need to slave for someone else', he told me. 'If I'm working for someone, black or white, when I see I'm being exploited I move on, I take what's mine and move on'.

Contempt for employers who were seen to get rich at the expense of workers was a frequent accusation. It was also one of the main reasons youth gave for their hesitation to take up certain jobs. In 2015, Tebogo (age 31) recounted his experience of working at a large supermarket as a merchandiser for a period of eight months. In a conversation about why he left this job, he drew attention to the disparity in wealth between the manager (a white, Afrikaans, middle-aged, overweight man in his early forties) and the predominantly black employees. Tebogo described the manager's daily routine that involved him working from his laptop at a coffee shop opposite the supermarket's entrance. The manager can 'go anywhere he wants at any time', Tebogo said in an envious but disapproving tone. He contrasted this image with a description of the employees working hard re-stocking the shelves, packing customers' bags and mopping the floor. Especially noticeable in Tebogo's account was the contrast he drew between the manager's purported lack of exertion and the employees' toil. As our conversation continued Tebogo contrasted his bosses lifestyle with his own: 'He is staying in a big house, driving a jeep, an expensive car, [and] going on holidays to Mauritius'. 'But', he continued, 'I can't even afford to go to Durban'. Tebogo pressed on, recounting how he, as an employee was 'making him [the boss] a lot of business'. 'He is sleeping in [a] nice house because of me', he emphasised, '[and] driving [a] range rover because of me'. Tebogo's inclusion within the labour market provided him with an intimate education *in* the acute and ever expanding reality of inequality in South Africa.

In juxtaposing his bosses' social and spatial mobility with his own, Tebogo also sought to highlight the immobility and inability to escape poverty in

these low-wage jobs. It is estimated to take a general worker in a supermarket, such as the one where Tebogo worked, 290 years to earn what the chief executive earns in a month (Ntongana 2016). Another interlocutor of mine who had previously worked in private security, but at the time of our conversation made money via criminal activities, told me he was no longer prepared to do a job that involved ‘watching white people’s wealth’. ‘It’s not worth it’, he said, because ‘you will die for watching a house that is not yours’. In all of this, what emerges is a reality in which race relations, perhaps irretrievably, taint the formal labour market. One of my interlocutors made this exact point. ‘If you’re searching for a job you will always be under white people’, Senzo remarked as we sat in my car parked on the backside of Motswako. ‘Most companies [are] run by white people’, he continued, ‘[Be]cause they still have the power more than black people.’ The first thing that stood out to me was Senzo’s suggestion that black youth who continue to depend on, or wait for, jobs in the formal economy would remain ‘under white people’, and as such be subjected to, or even trapped, in an unequal relation of dependence where the (white) employer continues to profit at the expense of (black) workers. It is from this perspective I suggest that the reluctance, or total refusal, to take up low-wage work can, and in fact must, be seen as a critique of an economy where many of the racial patterns of the past persist. The refusal of work is not only a critique. It is also a demand for social inclusion on terms where the things Tebogo’s boss has (the big houses, the cars, and overseas holidays) are more equitably distributed.

I have so far shown that young men’s reluctance to take up low-paid work, from the most strenuous and undesirable jobs from the roadside to jobs as

security guards and petrol attendants, lies in its failure to provide a decent and dependable means of provisioning. It is also, though inseparable from the first, closely linked to the persistence of racial inequalities in the formal labour market. If waged work is evaluated for its ability to provide the conditions of social mobility and maturation (including the social and financial obligations young men have to their families), it should not come as a surprise that so many of the young men I got to know did not actively seek out low-end jobs, and if they did find themselves in them, did so half-heartedly. Instead, many young men pursue alternative economic activities and modes of dependence in an attempt to remain *independent* of the wage economy.

The appeal of the ‘wageless life’

The notion of the informal economy has for a long time been used to label economic activities that are seen to be the exception to wage labour. Michael Denning (2010, 80) writes that the ‘wageless life has almost always been seen as a situation of lack, [or] the space of exclusion’. Making a living in the informal economy has therefore often been understood as a ‘last resort’ (Millar 2014, 33). This conceptualisation fails to appreciate, for example, that many of the young men who make their living in the township economy, as I described earlier, do not necessarily do so because they could not find a wage job but rather to guard against having to look for one in the first place. Viewed from this perspective, the informal economy can be seen, at least sometimes, as a mode of dependence people purposefully seek out to escape precarious and often highly exploitative work. As you might recall, many of the youth who congregated around Khenzo’s car wash stand had worked in the waged economy at some, and often at multiple points, in

the past. Khenzo as a petrol guard. Tebogo as a cashier. Xolani as a golf caddy. John as a security guard. These young men were not unaffected by waged labour as Keith Hart (1973) in the 1970s depicted large swathes of the urban labour force in Accra. This is significant because of the relationship between young men's experience *in* low-wage work and the urge, at least for some, to escape work arrangements that thwart their aspirations.

In this sense, Khenzo's car wash stand can be understood as a refuge *from* the wage economy rather than a last resort or substitute for work (Millar, 2014). Accordingly, we can see the informal economy, especially the more lucrative niches, as offering what low-paid and service-sector work cannot: a self-directed capacity to generate money and control over one's own time. While some young men embraced the freedom of the street economy and celebrated it as a reclaiming of dignity or form of resistance, as Bourgois (2003) describes in his study of crack dealers in East Harlem. Others were less celebratory and simply saw themselves as getting by without succumbing to jobs they deemed both unreliable and below them. I want to now briefly touch on the main attraction of the wageless life my interlocutors identified – time-autonomy – and then discuss the economic and political traction of the entrepreneurial discourse.

'Be the boss of your future': Time-autonomy and self-responsibilisation

Young men's aversion to having their time controlled by a boss, what Thompson (1967) called time-discipline, was one of the primary reasons my interlocutors gave for leaving jobs. As you might recall, Kabelo (who we

met earlier) told me he had walked away from his job as a salesman because it squandered his weekends and left him little time to keep company with his family and friends. His decision to forsake this casual job was not one of choosing more leisure over work but rather a choice that reflects the importance of having time to invest in one's social relations, more especially in the context of precarious work. I often got the impression that being out-of-work was if not essential, then at least a critical component, of being incorporated within certain kinds of non-market relations and forms of male solidarity. Tebogo, who left his job at a large supermarket, described the drawback of working six days a week, leaving early in the morning and returning after dark. This, he suggested, left him very little time to build up and maintain his relationships on the street that provide a critical source of support for many so-called unemployed young men. In a sense, being in full-time wage work came with the risk of forsaking, or being cut off, from these non-market economic practices and forms of mutual assistance. It is also true, as we saw earlier, that an integral element of being included within these relations of 'flexible reciprocity' is the ability to 'hustle' oneself and engage in reciprocal exchange.

Consequently, young people's decisions to quit a job were often tied, if not directly then indirectly, to a desire to have the necessary time to gain, or maintain, one's traction within local ties and networks. In the words of Tebogo: 'I want to wake up my time with no one telling me what to do'. This was not only the case for those who operate in the informal economy but also for persons who sought to seek out relations of patronage with the state or NGO actors. Sibongile, for instance, quit his call centre job to give him time to work in 'the community' to build a constituency before

standing for the local elections. I was struck again and again by the extraordinary amount of time and energy he spent tending relationships and investing in the youth-NGO and other ANC structures. Had he kept his job, he would never have had the time or flexibility to attend political meetings, local government events and briefings, many of which occurred during the week. Being unemployed, in this sense, affords youth the ‘relational autonomy’ (Millar 2014, 35) required to sustain the social relationships and networks that underpin many of the economic activities and economies young men participate in. We will return to a discussion on the incompatibility of the street and wage economy in the following chapter.

The appeal of making money on one’s own terms became especially apparent during a conversation with Hloni – an informal car-mechanic. Hloni (age 34) has lived in Zandspruit for over fifteen years. We met in 2011. Since the end of 2010, he has been working as a mechanic outside his yard in the less crowded section of the settlement. Hloni did not always work for himself. Prior to 2010, he worked as a panel beater for a year and after that as a mechanic for an auto-repair garage: a job he had for three years. In this job he earned around R6000 (\$420) a month for six days of work a week. This was, and still is, nearly double the average wage of most employed people in Zandspruit. Hloni nevertheless felt ripped off. After two years in this job he decided to begin an informal mechanic business on the side – fixing the cars of friends and neighbours – to supplement his income. Once he had begun to develop a network of customers and patrons of his own, he ditched his job and started his own business full-time. That was the end of 2010. Nowadays, with few controls on his time, Hloni works as and when he wants. Most of his customers drop their cars off (sometimes

leaving them with him for weeks) and if business is slow, he calls other mechanics to find a car in need of fixing. He gave me the impression he could find business as and when he wanted, or needed, it, and not the other way round. It appeared he liked it that way.

One day during a conversation inside his shack, where he often watched movies with his friends on a large flat screen television, he emphasised that – more than anything else – he liked being able to work without a boss telling him when he can or cannot take a coffee break. Moreover, unlike when he was in a job with a fixed salary, his income was not fixed but tied to the amount of time and work *he* put in. On more than one occasion, Hloni told me that if you work for someone else you would never get paid according to the work you do or the money you bring into the company. In one of our conversations he noted that when working at the auto-garage, fixing three or four cars a week – generating the company R100 000 or more – he could pocket no more than his salary of R6000. ‘How do I profit?,’ he asked rhetorically, expressing a widely held frustration. In a sense, his experience at the garage and desire for greater autonomy made even this, relatively well-paying, job unendurable. We can now see that the widely held desire to be one’s own boss is not only a reaction to the intolerability of low-wage work but, at least in some cases, a positive aspiration for self-determination and social advancement. This aspiration, and its implications and wider significance, however, need to be placed in a broader social, historical, and political context.

As noted in the sketch on the youth NGO, young people in Zandspruit are bombarded with messages about entrepreneurship from the state, NGOs, church (especially the Pentecostal sort) and the popular discourse in the media. Young people also frequently promoted the idea and aspiration of starting their own business. They saw this not only as a solution to unemployment but as a legitimate escape from menial jobs and a pathway to social mobility. One of my interlocutors, Itumaleng, wrote a book called 'Be the Boss of your Future'. In the introduction to Chapter Four titled 'Be your own boss by starting your own business' he writes:

A bit of shocking South African statistics. Only one out of every nine matriculants (14%) will get formal, salaried jobs. Only 9% will undergo tertiary education. As many as 80% will remain officially unemployed. To survive in such a harsh environment you need to start your own business. (Dithupe 2016, 32)

Echoing the entrepreneurial messages from the state, Tebogo instructs youth to not hold out for a job but rather to invent their own by starting a business. It is often assumed that the entrepreneurial discourse conceals inequality and is used to shift attention and blame away from the structural and systemic causes of joblessness and inequality towards individuals who are told to pull up their bootstraps and take charge of their own futures. I agree that the neoliberal logic of self-reliance and entrepreneurship is a convenient strategy to shift blame and attention away from a structural understanding of chronic unemployment and poverty to individuals who, under this logic, are made responsible for creating their own jobs. However, I suggest that young people's desire to be their own boss does not necessarily weaken a more radical critique of the current inequalities. It may, instead, stem from it. Urban youth's discontent with systematic socio-

economic exclusion can, in fact, help us understand the economic and political attraction of the entrepreneurial discourse amongst young un- or marginally employed young men. Viewed from this perspective, ‘being your own boss’ can be seen as an aspirational declaration of *independence* from, rather than dependence on, hierarchical and (still often) highly racialised wage labour (Ferguson, 2013, 2015). Further into the chapter, echoing Hloni’s observations, Itumaleng writes:

It’s hurting to working for someone else who is generating a lot of money by doing something you can do just as well at home [...] If you can sell a lot to clients while working for a boss, why can’t you do it for yourself? Think about your boss driving a brand new car and staying in a luxury town-house, whilst you stay in a shack or location. You can run your own business, my friend and be your own boss. You can generate a lot of money by doing what you do at work; stop being lazy and think smart. (Dithupe 2016, 33)

The appeal of the entrepreneurial rhetoric rests in part on its ability to give expression to the desire for economic independence, social advancement and ownership (Freeman 2014). Tsoanelo who we met earlier shared a similar view. In one of our conversations he described blacks as having had their minds ‘corrupted’ by colonialism and apartheid that made them reliant on working for white people instead of starting their own businesses and building their own wealth. Tsoanelo told me that apartheid and colonialism had deliberately disempowered the black majority by robbing them of the means of production (including land) and an entrepreneurial culture and thus made them, in his words, the ‘puppets of white people’. He insisted that black people needed to ‘stand up for our own’ while at the same time appreciating the limited skills and capital that prevent many young people if not from envisaging, or starting, then running their own profitable enterprises.

It is also worth noting that, while the discourse of entrepreneurship might reinforce a focus on the individual and self-reliance, the aspiration and preference of many youth to be their own boss is about more than escaping a relation of subordination. It also reflects a desire to be at the apex of the distributional hierarchy. Being a boss is associated with being in control but also giving orders, having patrons, and importantly having others depend on you. The appeal of the entrepreneurial discourse is perhaps as much about autonomy, individuality and social mobility as it is about distribution and what are seen to be more desirable forms of inter-dependence. What young men want is a relative degree of independence in terms of being able to live on their own terms while at the same time wanting a sense of being respected and socially recognised. The latter invariably comes from men's relationships with their peers, kin, girlfriends and others. A sense of being respected or socially included also has a lot to do with local understandings of legitimate and illegitimate (or proper and improper) forms of making or earning income. It is impossible to reduce young men's understandings of (il)legitimate labour to a distinction between employment and self-employment or the waged and wageless economies. Rather, as the following chapter illustrates, young people's conceptions of what is legitimate (in the moral sense) is neither automatic nor uniform. It is culturally informed, historically particular and mediated by a range of socio-economic and situational factors.

Conclusion

This chapter has teased apart the different kinds of dependencies available to young people in Zandspruit and explored how these dependencies are evaluated, one against another, from the perspective of young men themselves. I have demonstrated that working for a wage, especially at the bottom end of the labour market, is an especially unfavourable mode of dependence for local youth. To illustrate the coherence of young men's disdain for low-wage work, this chapter juxtaposed 'labouring', which is closely associated with being subservient to whites, with two alternative modes of getting-by, including 'hustling' in the street economy and 'volunteering' in local NGOs. I have argued that these alternative livelihood strategies are not, as is often presumed, a last resort or a desperate remedy in the absence of work, suggesting instead they be understood as an attempt by these young men to guard themselves against succumbing to the available but intolerable jobs. Moreover, by examining youth's expectations of citizenship and the persistence of racial inequalities in the workplace, I was able to trace the appeal of the 'wageless life' – along with the aspiration to be one's own boss – to a positive aspiration for self-determination and social mobility. I want to note that while many young people who occupy the NGO-office and/or the street-corner welcomed (even celebrated) being shielded from the very bottom of the urban labour market, they were nonetheless anxious about being permanently locked out of the mainstream economy and excluded from the imagined, or perhaps nostalgically invoked, assurances of having a 'proper job'.

One of the questions this chapter has implicitly opened up – but not addressed fully – concerns the nature of employment or, rather posed as a question: what counts as employment? Clearly, from what we have seen, the line between working or not, employment and unemployment, and what counts as a job or not, cannot be seen as a black and white binary. The distinction between ‘real’ or ‘proper’ jobs and just ‘any job’ or ‘piece jobs’ suggests that what counts as work has a range of shifting criteria. Definitions of work are contingent on people’s individual circumstances and future aspirations but also on culturally informed and socially defined values that concern what is desirable, legitimate, and just.

Nonetheless, it is possible to say two things. First, the term employment, or rather the status of someone who is employed, was used by the vast majority of young people to refer to someone in paid (or waged) work done outside of the settlement. Importantly, most of my interlocutors regard most informal work as ‘not-work’. It is also true, however, that some youth who were in casual and often low-paid employment still referred to themselves as unemployed because they saw their present job as improper or simply a stopgap measure. I think an important part of understanding this is the redistributive obligation (see Chapter Five) that comes with being an employed person. Unless a job allows a certain kind of class positioning, redistribution and consumption young men see it as ‘not-work’. Strikingly, the widespread perception that foreigners are more likely to be ‘employed’ adds further complexity because in most cases foreigners are not working in any traditional sense, nor are they in ‘proper’ jobs. But they are getting money. This opens up broader questions on income, labour, and

conceptions of ‘the good life’, and their real, and imagined, relations – questions we will return to in Chapter Six and the conclusion.

Chapter 4

The dynamics of incorporation: social connections, legitimacy and agency

Introduction

‘Most people going to work in the morning are from *outside*’, a man in his early forties told me as we stood outside his double-storey shack. ‘The people from *here* don’t work’, he continued. I encountered comments such as this again and again in my conversations with residents of all ages, genders, and nationalities. They drew a distinction between residents who were seen to fall within the boundaries of ‘the community’ of Zandspruit and those beyond it. Insiders are those entitled to count Zandspruit as home while outsiders are those whose residence in the settlement is presumed to be more temporary and motivated primarily by economic reasons. It is important to note that my interlocutors’ use of the insider/outsider categorisation did not simply map onto a distinction between foreigners and South Africans. The category of ‘outsiders’ included a broader group of people migrating into the area, including those from other provinces and neighbouring countries, but also those who had moved from other parts of Johannesburg to be closer to work opportunities.

At first, I viewed comments that linked people’s residential status (insider/outsider) to their employment status with suspicion, questioning whether they reproduced long-standing stereotypes of ‘hard-working’

migrants and ‘lazy’ locals²². Over the course of my fieldwork it became more evident that these categorisations – if viewed as residents’ own experiential interpretations of the segmentation in the economy as well as the economic life of the settlement – provided insight into the complex, and sometimes subtle, set of distinctions that mediate different individuals’ and social groups’ economic choices. This chapter is thus an attempt to demonstrate that the well-rehearsed claim that ‘outsiders’ are more likely to be employed than locals has less to do with cultural differences, work ethics, or even subjective valuations – though the latter, as we saw in the previous chapter, matter a great deal – and perhaps more to do with the uneven distribution of resources, power, and opportunities amongst residents *within* Zandspruit.

The previous chapter touched upon the ways in which different groups – including immigrants, internal migrants, and locals – appraise various ways of getting by or modes of dependence. It did not interrogate the conditions and particular circumstances that shape the kinds of dependencies both individuals, and social groups, choose, or fall into. My aim in this chapter is thus to grapple precisely with how agency is distributed: who has more or less choice, and why? And following on from the previous chapter: who is more likely to be exposed or sheltered from the market, and especially from the lowest paying jobs, and why?

²² These stereotypes should be viewed in the context of the apartheid influx laws that created divisions between urban ‘insiders’ who had residential rights and rural migrants (‘outsiders’) whose presence in the city was dependent on them being in state-regulated employment.

This chapter uses life histories to compare the experiences of two of my interlocutors, who despite coming from similar socio-economic backgrounds represent divergent social positions and trajectories. Juxtaposing Thatho (a long-standing resident who makes a living in the informal economy wiring ‘illegal’ electricity connections) and Joel (a more recent migrant who has worked on and off in a casual retail job in-between long stretches of unemployment) illuminates the factors that mediate the kinds of choices young people have available to them, and the decisions they make. In the latter part of the chapter I theorise the processes that structure the livelihood choices of individuals and the conditions that differentiate their chances of success. I show that individual choices not only change over time but are also profoundly contingent upon the economic, social, and cultural resources people have at their disposal. In so doing, I propose a re-conceptualisation of unemployment not as a static condition or one marked by permanent marginalisation. Rather, I show that unemployment is a condition punctuated by a multitude of actions and relations; and a choice that depends upon a complex array of socio-economic, biographical, and moral factors that are themselves in flux, and surpass individual intention and action. Taken together, this chapter argues that urban youth’s capacity to escape precarious and exploitative work in the capitalist economy is a reflection of the uneven distribution of local ties, social networks and resources.

Portraits

Thatho: the street hustler

At twenty-one, Thatho is short and wiry with a diamond stud in his left ear, and two gold-capped front teeth – a fashion trend that has been resurrected in recent years by the hip-hop industry. I first met Thatho on the top street in ‘transit camp’ (the oldest neighbourhood) where he grew up. He stood out with his red suede Carvela shoes (a high-end designer brand) that are associated with the youth sub-culture *I’khotane*.²³ I was introduced to Thatho through a mutual friend who knew I wanted to talk to someone who made a living as a ‘connector’ in the illegal electricity market. Thatho grew up in Zandspruit. His mother, who works at a nearby crèche, was one of the original settlers in Zandspruit in the mid-1990s. In 2015 he was living in a backyard shack in his mother’s yard. This provided him with a measure of independence and is a common practice amongst long-standing residents who can forfeit the rental income.

Thatho got involved fixing illegal connections in his second year of high school. At first he concentrated on the less dangerous work of repairing people’s wires inside their shacks. Over time he learnt how to connect new wires to the transformers and ultimately new shacks to the grid: a dangerous

²³ *I’khotane* is primarily known for its performances of ‘destructive consumption’ that involve poor, predominantly male, township youth burning designer clothes and shoes worth thousands of rands (M. Jones 2013). These modes of consumption are seen to raise the status of those engaged in them while also critiquing the culture of consumption that surrounds them.

(and sometimes deathly) task. Before 2013, when Thatho was still in school, he and other ‘connectors’ charged a one-off fee of R150 (\$10) for the connection. In Thatho’s last few years of high school, between 2011-2013, the illegal electricity market in Zandspruit exploded. Today, wires resembling a game of pick-up-sticks criss-cross the sky above the thousands of densely packed shacks stretching out as far as the eye can see. While the network might appear haphazard and disorderly to an outsider, it is in fact closely controlled by groups of young men in their twenties and thirties. Most of the connectors are long-established residents who have turned the demand for electricity, much like the demand for cheap rental accommodation, into a lucrative business operation.

Thatho finished secondary school in 2013 and had little interest in furthering his studies. One day while sitting behind the clinic on two white plastic chairs Thatho told me he had thought about going to university but had decided, as he put it: ‘it wasn’t for me’. ‘I think it’s a waste of time’, he said, recounting how his cousin with an accounting degree from the University of Johannesburg was ‘sitting’ at home unable to find work. ‘Looking at the South African economy’, he continued, ‘people are retrenching [and] our economy is going into recession’. Instead of going to university Thatho applied for a number of government jobs in the police force and navy. ‘Why the police force or navy?’, I asked. He told me these jobs did not require a university degree and were permanent, well paid and had benefits. Thatho never heard back on any of these job applications.

In mid-2014, half way through his first year out of school, he agreed at his mother's urging to attend a work readiness program offered by a local NGO. It promised to make him more employable, teaching him the kinds of skills, time-discipline and decorum required of someone working in new service-sector jobs. A few weeks after the training, a long-standing friend said he could help get him a job selling sports equipment at a nearby shopping centre. With few other options, and at his friend and mother's insistence, he applied and got the job. It required him to work long hours including weekends (a prerequisite in retail) and paid him 'peanuts'. He hated it. After six months he quit. 'I came back and sat at home for May, June, July, August, September....', he said slowly, recollecting the months in his mind. It did not take Thatho long after his stint in a retail job to realise he could make significantly more money as a 'connector'. In the months that followed, Thatho and his friend, Sandile, who lived on the same street, and like him had been connecting electricity since he was a teenager, decided to work together and to, in Thatho's words, 'make a living out of this'.

One of the things that struck me most in our conversations was Thatho's use of business jargon to describe his work as a 'connector'. On more than one occasion he referred to Sandile and himself as 'entrepreneurs' and 'business partners'. Likewise, the households whose electricity wires they repair and maintain are referred to as 'customers', who pay, to use Thatho's terms, 'joining fees' for the initial connection and from then on 'monthly premiums'. It took me some time to realise the significance of his use of these commercial terms for what they revealed about the organisation of the informal electricity market, its evolution over time, and the cultural and

moral work ‘connectors’ engaged in to acquire and maintain ‘social legitimacy’.

There is a long history of illegal connections and non-payment of service charges in urban South Africa (McMichael 2008). During apartheid, non-payment and theft were a strategy to undermine the state’s control in urban townships. In the post-apartheid period, illegal connections have primarily been viewed as an appropriate response to the state’s failure to deliver services, and, in some instances, a conscious attempt to resist the privatisation and commodification of basic services. One of the most prominent post-apartheid social movements to champion non-payment in the struggle against neoliberal reforms and the use of prepaid meters is the Gauteng-based Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) (Veriava and Naidoo 2008). The expansion and commodification of illegal connections – whereby large numbers of residents pay a monthly fee to local connectors – only emerged after 2010. The shift not only reflects a different model of provision championed by local entrepreneurs like Thatho but a change in the moral logic that underpins the illegal electricity distribution network.

In Zandspruit’s first decade, the tapping of electricity from neighbouring plots of land and municipal poles was unsystematic. It was part of what Bayat (2004) calls a ‘quiet encroachment’, whereby the poor, in the absence of the state, engage in various survival techniques to improve their lives. During this period, teenage boys like Thatho helped people connect illegally with a view that electricity was not only a basic necessity but also essential for modern life. It followed then that power should be made available to

everyone irrespective of their ability to pay for it (McMichael 2008, 92). While in the first decade ‘connectors’ might have expected some kind of reward (in cash or kind), they did not view this as a payment for a service. In 2015, when I met Thatho, illegal connections criss-crossed the entire settlement with at least sixty per cent of households illegally connected. The majority of residents still thought electricity should be a public good provided by the state. But they had given up waiting for the government to electrify the area. This contributed to residents resorting to doing things for themselves, giving rise to a network and economy of amateur technicians and ‘connectors’ (Degani 2013). The government’s failure to bring formal electricity to the area ultimately created an informal economy of electricity distribution that has in turn fostered the commodification of the electricity market ‘from below’.

The illegal electricity network represents a mode of entrepreneurship that emerges out of necessity. For Hernando de Soto (2000) the informal economy of electricity distribution represents a form of resistance of the poor against the state and a sign of heroic entrepreneurship. But these forms of entrepreneurship do not occur in a vacuum. The informal electricity wires in Zandspruit are maintained and controlled according to street- and neighbourhood-level youth groupings that remind one of the territorial-based youth street gangs Clive Glaser described in Soweto in the 1970s (Glaser 2000). In ‘transit camp’ – the area where Thatho and Sandile operate – there are seven groupings of young men who control the network that diverts power from the transformer on Marina drive (next to the shopping centre). The rise of entrepreneurs like Thatho with command over

local networks, infrastructure and services are as much expressions of local power as they are entrepreneurialism.

Residents have mixed views about the informal electricity market and ‘connectors’ like Thatho. Most residents I spoke with recognise ‘connectors’ provide power at significant risk to their lives, while also complaining about the added expenses, the anticipation of blackouts and breakdowns, and the abuse should they not pay. Some local residents chastised local connectors for further impeding the government’s plans to electrify the area. Others actively opposed illegal connections because of the association of ‘connectors’ with corruption and theft. The illegal electricity network is often referred to as *izinyoka* (the isiXhosa/isiZulu word for snake). This is a remnant of a series of adverts run on television, radio and in print by the electricity supplier, Eskom, in the early 2000s to reduce electricity theft. Cable thieves and ‘connectors’ were labelled *izinyoka* in an attempt to brand them as criminals.

Pricklier than the issue of tapping power from the local school and clinic, who owe the City of Johannesburg millions of rands in debt, or the corrupt officials who accept bribes to fix the transformers after hours, was the legitimacy of ‘connectors’ extracting fees from cash-poor residents. Thatho’s harnessing of the entrepreneurial discourse must thus be seen as part of a strategy to produce social legitimacy and contest the association of *izinyoka* with criminality and public danger.

Thatho did not see his work as criminal but as a form of entrepreneurship that allowed him to profit at the same time as ‘helping’ the community. Unlike the SECC’s ‘volunteer technicians’ who re-connect residents in opposition to the introduction of prepaid meters (a government cost-recovery measure), Thatho and Sandile viewed themselves as offering a service that residents (as customers) must pay for. As if justifying the fees they charged, Thatho emphasised the effort involved in dodging the police, repairing and maintaining the wires, and the risks doing so posed to his life. In the past two years four people, including a young child, have died as a result of the hazardous connections. Moreover, Thatho underlined the material benefits to residents: improved safety, a reduction in shack fires, and cost-savings if compared to the cost of prepaid electricity should the government deliver on its promise to electrify the settlement. Most of the residents I spoke with appreciate these gains. The business, Thatho explained, is ‘giving back to the community and [in return] we expect a little from them’. In a sense, Sandile and Thatho appropriate the state’s own cost-recovery discourse (von Schnitzler 2008) to depict themselves as doing good and thus challenge the public and government’s view of them as criminals.

In 2015, Thatho and Sandile charged R200 (\$14) for a new connection and thereafter R150 (\$10) a month. It is a flat charge per shack or room that they collect at the end of each month in cash. I asked Thatho during my fieldwork if he has any difficulty getting residents to pay. To my surprise, he told me ninety-five per cent of residents pay him on time, with only five per cent ‘causing trouble’. In early 2016, Thatho and Sandile had ninety ‘customers’ in the oldest section of the settlement known as

‘transit camp’. While this is only a small fraction of the overall market, they were making around R18000 (\$1260) a month and individually pocketing R9000 (\$635): roughly three times what Thatho made in retail working six days a week.

Joel: the hopeful job seeker

At twenty-six, Joel is tall, lean and always well dressed, but not flashy. We first met at a workshop organised by an NGO called Heartlines on ‘values and money’. We both arrived at Pastor Magagula’s church for the advertised 10 o’clock start. He sat in the middle of the back row of white plastic chairs in an ironed red shirt and slightly faded jeans. He had come with a small A4 folder, the kind one takes to a job interview. I approached him and sat down. Looking around the church’s corrugated iron sheets disguised with blue and green silk, he joked: ‘I’m always early for things’. Joel had moved to Zandspruit a month earlier to look for a job. His older brother – who works as a gardener in the week and for an estate agent on some weekends – had invited him to come and find work ‘this side’. As is common with many newcomers, especially those with a resident family member in the settlement, he moved into his brother’s rented shack on the assumption he would find a place of his own as soon as he found a job.

Joel grew up with his grandmother in a rural area of Limpopo province where he finished secondary school in 2009. Having enjoyed school, and done quite well, Joel had been encouraged by his teachers to enrol at college or university. A bureaucratic glitch brought his plans to further his studies to an immediate halt. His national identity number on his school-leaving

certificate was incorrect. With no official proof of having completed school, he was unable to register or apply for government bursaries. In the second half of 2010, still waiting for his certificate to be re-issued, he joined the same older brother – who lived in Soweto at the time – to look for work. Despite attending a two-week call-centre training, and spending the little money his brother could spare to print and drop off his CV, he struggled to find anything. After a few months with no success, and little to live off in the city, he returned to Limpopo where he depended on his grandmother's meagre government pension.

Joel's struggle to find work in Johannesburg had brought him to the realisation that a matric certificate, while necessary for the most elementary service-sector jobs, was insufficient to secure better-paying jobs. His failure to find work in the city renewed his commitment to further his education. Unlike Thatho, Joel saw education as a gateway to better work and ultimately social advancement. Joel finally received his correct matric certificate in October 2011. In January 2012, two years after leaving school, he registered at a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college in Limpopo for a diploma in public management. His studies did not last long. Six months into the course he was forced to terminate his course because the government bursary he had received had been embezzled, or, in Joel's words, had simply 'disappeared.' With no 'financial backing', as Joel put it, he was left with no other option but to return to his grandmother's place.

As people started filling up the seats in the church I asked Joel what type of work he was looking for. He told me he did not want a job that would ‘close options’ (pointing with his hands inwards) but a job that would provide him with progression and the ability to build a life of his own (pointing with his hand in an open direction). From Joel’s perspective, having a ‘short CV’ (with no work experience) was the greatest stumbling block to finding work. As a result, he explained, his CV ‘can’t talk’ – or stand out – amongst the hundreds and sometimes thousands of applicants. He had therefore decided to go in person to factories, businesses, and shops in the surrounding area to drop off his CV. He hoped that given the opportunity to talk to the boss face-to-face he could convince him or her of his superior abilities, work ethic, and desire to succeed. Despite recurrent disappointment, he remained remarkably determined he would one day ‘touch success’. As the workshop began we exchanged contacts and agreed to stay in touch.

Joel and I met a few weeks later at the community centre. He was still without a job and living with his brother. Our conversation that day revolved around his search for work. Like many youth who move to the city he was grappling with the disjuncture between the type of work he wanted and the jobs on offer. He spoke about wanting a ‘permanent job’ that would allow him to build an independent life for himself and give him opportunities to progress. The available jobs doing night-shift security, frying chicken at KFC, or re-stocking shelves at a grocery store were a far cry from the type of ‘office job’ he imagined for himself. These jobs were casual, low-paid and carried no job security or benefits. After spending two months job-hunting with no success he was forced to consider jobs he had

previously avoided. He now appeared open to any opportunity that would give him a foothold in the formal job market, a measure of independence from his brother, or, if nothing else, at least the ability to contribute towards the cost of rent and food. Knowing his struggle to find work, I asked Joel if he had considered starting his own business. 'It's a lot of responsibility', he told me, describing the challenges of starting a small enterprise without capital, property, and a secure source of income. He caricatured many of the micro-businesses that line the streets of Zandspruit as follows: you start with R10 and you make R13. With R3, he asked rhetorically, 'what have you gained?' Joel understood that while a few niches of the informal economy (the rental market, illegal electricity market, and crime) can be highly profitable, the majority of informal livelihoods (and certainly the ones accessible to him as a newcomer) provide little else than 'money to survive'.

After three and a half months looking for work Joel found himself a part-time job at a supermarket working in the deli section: preparing, packaging, and selling pre-cooked food to the suburban middle-class. This is a job many of my interlocutors viewed as being below them and ostensibly 'women's work'. He was employed on a casual basis and worked four days a week earning around R2000 (\$140) a month. A few weeks into his new job we met again. When I asked him about the job he emphasised that the work was 'easy'. He was not referring to the work itself: that involved long hours on his feet and rude and impatient customers. Instead, he was pointing out that he was 'bored' and, most importantly, over-qualified and better-suited to white-collar work. Before I could ask him any further questions he began detailing how his boss Mr Bosman verbally abused and threatened the staff.

The bosses 'are bullies', he said, describing how many of the employees who had worked for the company for five or more years remained casual employees with no job security or benefits. In the subsequent months when we met, Joel was more forthright in his criticisms of the managers who he described as 'running over the workers' and refusing to comply with the country's labour protections.

Joel did not consider himself to be employed in this job. He viewed this 'piece job', as he referred to it, as a provisional stopgap while he continued to look for a 'proper job'. In categorising his job as 'piece work' Joel was drawing a distinction between the job he had and the stable, well-paying job he yearned for. In doing so, he could justify his disappointment and dissatisfaction with his current job while safeguarding his estimation of and aspiration for a job where 'you wear formal clothes'. Joel frequently emphasised his efforts to further his education and contrasted himself to other youth in Zandspruit who he thought lacked purpose and direction. After arriving in Johannesburg the second time, he enrolled at the University of South Africa to do a Bachelor of Arts degree in Law but, due to financial constraints, was unable to proceed beyond the first semester. He nevertheless remained confident his 'patience' (the thing he faulted many youth for lacking) would pay off. Nine months after he got the job at the supermarket, I got in touch with Joel again. He had recently left his job to attend another intensive 8-week job-readiness course that aims to place all the youth who complete the program in entry-level jobs in call centres and hospitality. Two months after completing the program he was still waiting to hear back from the agency. When we last spoke in January 2018 no job had transpired. He had been left with no other option than to return – a

year and a half later – to the very same supermarket where he worked in 2015.

The uneven distribution of choice

When compared to my interlocutors as a whole Thatho and Joel are neither typical nor extreme. Instead, they exemplify and make visible the social relations of power and cultural processes that mediate young men's economic decisions and trajectories. On the face of things, Thatho and Joel have a lot in common. They both come from poor backgrounds and matrilineal households. They have similar educational qualifications (notwithstanding Joel's attempts to further his education) and have experienced the insecurity of low-end service-sector work. It is, however, impossible to ignore the different economic, social and cultural resources at their disposal that ultimately shape the opportunities available to them and their chances of success.

Having grown up in Zandspruit, Thatho is entangled in long-established relationships that come with distinct social advantages that many newcomers lack. Thatho not only has access to rent-free accommodation but is incorporated within a web of social relations, both at home and on the street, that provide him with a safety net to meet his daily needs of food and shelter independent of salaried work. Moreover, his incorporation within modes of interaction on the street give him a kind of cultural capital that is altogether different from that which is needed to operate within the formal economy. Joel has none of these things. His social network is limited to his brother (who also depends on piecework for his living) and a few people he

has met while enquiring about work opportunities and at church. Unlike Thatho, Joel (and his brother's) access to informal housing is inextricably linked to their ability to pay for it. This alone compels many immigrants and more recent migrants to seek out piecework to pay for rent and electricity. Furthermore, Joel is not sufficiently networked to find better-paying work in the formal labour market, nor has he been in Zandspruit long enough to have any real traction in the informal economy. Thatho's ability to make R9000 (\$650) a month in the electricity market compared to Joel's struggle to find or transcend low-paid service work, despite all his efforts to do so, is perhaps the clearest example of the uneven distribution of choice.

The question we must then ask is what capacities does someone like Thatho have that Joel does not? And, moreover, what are the conditions that differentiate relative livelihood success? Taking into account different choices enables us to talk about varied trajectories from shared economic predicaments. We need a theory that allows for agency that does not forget the very real constraints posed by the contexts in which young people operate. Henrik Vigh's (2006) concept of 'social navigation' has become increasingly popular in anthropology to conceptualise the space between agency and social forces. Rather than acting as a metaphor for agency, navigation reflects the 'inseparability of act and environment, knowledge and praxis' (ibid. 14). It is thus helpful in delineating the *interaction* between the social, cultural and economic processes that frame experience and structure people's actions and pathways.

In drawing attention to the constant interaction of agency and social forces – of ‘motion within motion’ – the concept of ‘navigation’ demarcates *attempts* to make the most of a situation in a volatile and shifting environment. This is a mode of action that involves constant reassessment and correction with no presumption about how things will turn out. It is important to stress that while Vigh conceptualises the social terrain as one that is constantly in flux he recognises that a person’s experience of control over social forces is unevenly distributed and ‘situationally defined’ (Vigh 2009, 430, 423). The concept of ‘social navigation’ therefore allows us to examine how agency is closely related to a person’s social and economic position within a given socio-spatial location. For example, the comparison of Thatho and Joel illustrates that some youth have a greater degree of agency to constitute the social terrain and relational networks they operate within than others. Importantly, the concept of ‘social navigation’ counters an overemphasis on agency without due attention to structural constraints and local power configurations, on the one hand, and normative regulations (i.e. social rules and moral codes), on the other.

Vigh also recognises the co-existence of different temporal registers in people’s attempts to get by, noting how their actions are ‘directed toward immediate and future survival, [...] navigating lives along an envisioned trajectory in an unstable environment’ (2006, 129). Social navigation is thus a useful analytical optic to examine the relationship between young men’s immediate struggle to secure a livelihood and their attempts to steer their lives in a direction that is viable and meaningful in the future.

Social connections and why ‘who you know around here’ matters

The categories of insiders and outsiders, or established residents and newcomers, were a common reference point when discussing different residents’ standard of living and economic choices. These terms revealed much more than how long someone had lived in Zandspruit. They drew attention to the ways in which social connections and their associated resources were distributed, and social difference produced. This became especially apparent during a conversation with Eric (age 30) who grew up in Zandspruit. Eric’s regular sources of income included rental income, running a small IT business from his home, and hiring out his DJ equipment to local taverns over the weekend. Eric told me that the reason local youth like him can refuse to take up work that would ‘drain them emotionally or physically’ was because they ‘have a bed and food on the table at the end of the day’. Local youth, he continued, ‘would rather sit at home’ if they have a meal waiting for them at the end of the day.

Eric not only made a distinction between long-standing residents (like himself) and newcomers, but also drew attention to different kinds of newcomers. There are those who arrive in Zandspruit and ‘don’t know somebody’ and those who are ‘invited’ or ‘called’ to come and stay with a relative. Eric was not the only one to make these kinds of connections. Sibongile (age 32), who helped lead the youth NGO, believed that youth ‘from Zandspruit’ have ‘easier’ access to money and as a result ‘tend to relax a bit’ and ‘start to be lazy’. He told me that newcomers, on the other hand, face greater ‘pressure to find jobs’ precisely because of their finite

connections and hesitance to not ‘overload’ the few they have. Both Eric and Sibongile’s comments point to the close intersection of two related factors that have a bearing on young people’s economic choices: household and tenure arrangements and the density and strength of one’s social relations within the settlement. As we will see in the discussion below, the distinction between a resident who pays rent and one who does not is no simple matter. It derives from one’s place within Zandspruit’s history and its very complicated matrix of property relations, upon which wealth, social resources, and cultural competencies hang.

Property relations and tenure

Where in Zandspruit someone lives, what kind of dwelling they occupy, and if they pay rent or not, are not random actualities but critical markers of social standing and differentiation. Housing and tenure arrangements are in many respects an objective measure of the uneven distribution of social capital in Zandspruit. The main factor that distinguishes a person who lives rent-free from those who do not is how long they have lived in the settlement. The length of time someone has lived in Zandspruit corresponds closely with the density of a person’s local ties and connections. Most of my interlocutors who grew up in Zandspruit, or had lived there for ten years or more, benefitted from rent-free accommodation. These arrangements took many different forms. Some young men lived in the same dwelling as their relatives, while others, as was the case with Thatho, lived in an independent shack in a family member’s yard. Others occupied a stand or property they had inherited from a family member who left the settlement. Often this was due to a family member moving to take up work elsewhere, being able to afford to live in a wealthier neighbourhood, or because the person (often a

parent or grandparent) had retired to their rural home. In a number of cases, younger family members were tasked with retaining de-facto ownership of the family stand in exchange for rent-free accommodation and a cut of the rental income.

Conversely, accommodation for recent arrivals depended much more upon their ability to pay for it. In many instances, this involved renting a one-room shack in someone else's yard, though sometimes, as we saw with Joel, migrants would share or sub-let a room to save money. There were a few exceptions to these general patterns. I met a few young men (and women for that matter) who forsook a rent-free shack in a relative's yard to have greater privacy or independence, or, as we saw with Khenzo in the previous chapter (who ran the car-wash business), to gain leverage over a specific terrain in the local economy.

The consequences stemming from where and with whom one lives cannot be reduced to a division between those who pay rent and those who do not. The distinction between occupant-owners and tenants should instead be seen as the scaffolding upon which local advantages, or their absence, hang. Most of the young men I knew with privileged access to property – who live 'rent-free' or 'own' their shack – nearly always lived with family members or on a stand previously owned by a family member. In addition to the wider non-familial location-based connections that accumulate over time, these family bonds provide long-standing residents with all kinds of financial and non-financial support that most newcomers lack. These include lower housing costs, a denser network of social resources and support, and

superior opportunities to profit from de facto property rights or control over territory.

Social connections and the clustering of advantages

The benefits that accrue to established residents and property-owners compared to tenants are significant. One of the main advantages of owning the property or shack you reside within is the lowered cost of urban living. The cost of renting a room in Zandspruit ranges from R300 to R1200 (\$20-85) a month depending on the size of the room, the quality of the structure, and the location. This is no small sum when one considers the average tenant earns significantly less than R2500 (\$180), and spends a large proportion of this on transport to get to and from work, never mind the costs of electricity, food, and supporting family members. My interlocutors who did not pay rent acknowledged this saving and its bearing on their economic choices, and the lower odds of them leaving Zandspruit any time soon. 'We are living free of charge here', Hloni (the informal mechanic I discussed in Chapter Three) told me, juxtaposing his life to the fixed monthly expenses of many people in Zandspruit but also, intriguingly, those living in the suburbs who he told me must pay for utilities, rent and bond repayments. In my conversations with immigrants and newcomers I often heard the opposite: that life in Zandspruit was expensive. For instance, in answer to a question I posed to Joel about his experience of living in Zandspruit, he drew a contrast with his life in Limpopo where he previously lived with his grandmother. 'The life in Limpopo is simple', he told me. 'You live not thinking about tomorrow. You live not looking for work.' But, he continued, in Zandspruit 'it's like you are here to work, not live. It's not home. When you are here you know you've got to get a job or

something. And the food here is more expensive. And here you cannot ask for food from neighbours. In Limpopo you can go and borrow, ask for salt.'

Unlike Joel, my interlocutors with rent-free housing arrangements not only saved money but also benefitted from the resources associated with durable kin and non-kin networks of support. For example, Thatho ate most of his evening meals at his mother's house. It was quite common for young men to have dinner at the home of a family member, sibling, lover, or neighbour. In some cases they received a meal in a Tupperware container to be eaten at their own leisure. It is precisely these protections – a warm meal at night and a bed to sleep in – that shape young people's calculation as to whether it is worth it to seek out a low-end job. Household and tenure arrangements not only mediate different residents' costs of living in the city, but also their chances of making money in the local economy.

Property and entrepreneurship

Other research has recently pointed out the important but under-researched link between property-ownership and entrepreneurship in townships and informal settlements (Heer 2018). The importance of property or land varies depending on the kind and scale of the business. Most micro-traders do not own land or property. The slumlords that profit from the booming rental market, however, do so only because of their privileged access to property. I am not only referring to ownership (de facto or de jure) here but also the ability to assert control over social and spatial territory that is essential to being able to profit from some of the most lucrative niches within the local economy. We saw this with the car wash stand and the

operation of the illegal electricity network. Thatho and Sandile's de facto control over this turf is inextricably tied to the density of social relations and ties they have acquired through their long residence in this area. On the flip side, many newcomers, and especially foreigners, pay substantial sums of money to operate *spaza* shops or the larger businesses on the perimeter of the settlement selling furniture or mattresses. These include the more regular expenses of rent and the less frequent, but still common, demands for money from local gangs, extra-legal patrol groups and street committees.

It is not coincidental that most of my interlocutors who made significant profit in the local economy, be it through the operation of a small business or through rents, were long-standing residents. For example, Hloni, who runs the informal mechanic business (see Chapter Three), moved to Zandspruit as a teenager with his mother. Hloni's mom, who has worked as a domestic worker her whole life, no longer lives in Zandspruit. His older sister (along with her three young children) and him now live on the stand and consider it their own. In fact, his sister and him built two smaller shacks on the stand they rent out as an additional source of income. Likewise, Eric ran his IT business from his mother's two-bedroom brick-and-mortar house in the more formalised section of the settlement. His mother received this stand because she was one of the original residents in the area and a beneficiary of the government's housing scheme. She financed the construction of the house with her pension and rental income. Between 2015-2016, Eric managed the construction of two-concrete back rooms to replace the two shacks his mother and him rent out. It was rare for property-owners to invest resources in building concrete extensions and

backrooms unless, like Eric's mother, they had officially recognised title deeds – something only a few hundred residents in the more formalised sections have. Eric was confident their investment would pay off given the high and increasing demand for concrete rooms.

Most of the youth I got to know who benefitted from rental income made a few hundred rand, but never more than R1000-R1500 (\$70-\$100). I did meet a few local youth who, like the slumlords I discussed in Chapter Two, made significantly more. I got to know a young man called Walter who invested the money he made selling cars on the black market into bricks and cement. Like Eric, his mother had also received a serviced stand in the mid-2000s. She died in 2009 before realising her dream of building a home of her own. By 2015, Walter had built a *spaza* shop the size of a double-garage. He rented it to two Somalian brothers for R10 000 (\$700) a month. He had also built eight concrete back rooms and an incomplete two-room house above the *spaza* shop for himself. This brought his total rental income close to R20 000 (\$1400) a month. His success had fuelled his aspirations to buy up RDP houses in Zandspruit and neighbouring Cosmo City to profit from the increasing demand for accommodation in the city.

I am not suggesting there is a simple relationship between privileged access to housing and the ability to attain rents, or, for that matter, being able to escape low-paid work or poverty. It is, however, impossible to ignore that residents with rent-free arrangements escape some of the costs of urban life and thus obtain a buffer of support. This was confirmed in the survey I conducted. Of the hundred youths surveyed, roughly equal numbers paid

rent and lived rent-free, 49 and 51 respectively. But only eight out of the 51 who did not pay rent themselves noted rental income as a major source of their individual income (as distinct from the household or yard's income). Tellingly, the eight were all South African and, besides one, all men. All told, there are clear patterns in the relationship between property, social relations and young people's economic decisions. With some exceptions and the expected variation according to gender, age, and nationality, my evidence suggests that the volume of social capital urban youth possess, in terms of the extent of their social network and the cumulative resources they can mobilise as a result, corresponds to how long they have lived in the area, and, more important than any other factor, who they know. That said, the successful acquisition of economic and social resources is not straightforward. As we will see below, different economic strategies require different cultural competencies along with certain kinds of attitudes, values, and temporal orientations.

Cultural style and the production of legitimacy

While examining the uneven distribution of social connections and resources provides much insight into youth's different livelihood choices and pathways, it is not the full story. The social capital at someone's disposal is not allocated or obtained in a detached manner, but involves active work and a familiarity with a wider web of cultural beliefs, symbols, and practices (Willis 1977). The juxtaposition of Thatho and Joel reveals the kinds of cultural resources and capacities that are required to participate within different economic activities. It also shows how the failure to enter (or succeed) within a particular sector of the economy can also be understood as a 'cultural dislocation' (Bourgois 2003, 114). For instance, Thatho's

participation in the illegal electricity market depends upon a fluency in the ‘cultural practices’ of the street economy. This involves a familiarity with the circumvention of state institutions that often involves violence. Moreover, his ability to profit from the local electricity market would not be possible were it not for his shrewd improvisational skills that include his ability to present himself as an entrepreneur who is ‘helping’ the community’ rather than a criminal. Joel, on the other hand, not only lacks the competencies that are necessary to have any real purchase in the local economy, but also actively resists its cultural codes and moral logics. Instead, he invests his energy in cultivating an educated demeanour that he hopes will open up opportunities for him in the formal economy.

James Ferguson’s discussion on ‘cultural style’ on the Zambian Copperbelt emphasises the performative nature of cultural difference (Ferguson 1999, 93–110). Ferguson shows how different attitudes, values, temporal orientations, and ways of getting by are actively produced in relation to one another. He uses the term ‘cultural style’ to refer to the variety of stylistic practices and skills that are used to signify social difference. In Ferguson’s words, ‘style’ is neither simply received [...] or simply adopted [...] it is cultivated, through a complex and only partly conscious activity over time’ (ibid. 101). Ferguson’s conceptualisation of ‘style’ allows us to appreciate the kinds of ‘stylistic’ experimentation and improvisation young men undertake to navigate economic adversity. This final section thus returns to a discussion of the stylistic choices and pathways taken by Thatho and Joel. It pays particular attention to the cultural work involved in the social process of achieving and maintaining legitimacy. I am not only referring to legitimacy in the legal sense but also in a moral sense regarding assumptions

about what is ‘right’ or ‘fair’ that shape men’s understandings of moral worth and social recognition.

Performing entrepreneurialism

Thatho’s ability to generate profit wiring illegal connections does not stem exclusively from his knowledge of and control over the informal electricity infrastructure or means of production: the wires, cables, territory, and transformers. It also stems from his proficiency in negotiating a multitude of social relations and local orders that give him leverage in the street economy. Thus Thatho’s technical capabilities – including the skills required to maintain and fix electricity wires – cannot be disjoined from a range of other capabilities that involve complex material and symbolic exchanges. This includes the cultivation of relations with local power brokers and gangs that operate in the same area, bribing the police and officials, and securing residents’ fees. To pull this off is no easy task. It requires tacit knowledge about Zandpsruit’s complex property regime including familiarity with who lives on each stand, how long they have lived there, if they are a tenant or not, along with knowledge about the electricity arrangements of each household and shack that preceded Thatho and Sandile’s control of this area. Thatho’s know-how is also intimately tied to his ability to discern, and negotiate, multiple modes of local authority that have a long history of subverting the state, laws and the police, often via violence or the threat of violence. Importantly, Thatho’s acquisition of this knowledge and his ability to put it to use – to chase off competitors and enforce payment – is not learned in books but rather through his participation *in* this social world. It is a practice that demands time, effort, and trade-offs.

The trade-offs involved became especially clear towards the end of my fieldwork. In December 2015, a few weeks before Christmas, I was surprised to learn Thatho had returned to the sports shop where he worked during his first year out of school. It was a contract position for six weeks over the busy Christmas period. The reason he gave for returning was his need for extra cash during the festive season. Thatho was not alone in wanting to make extra money to cover the costs of year-end parties and family gatherings. While these additional expenses motivated him to take up the job they were not enough for him to stick around. Much like before, Thatho quit three weeks into the contract. Or, more accurately, he simply did not arrive at work one day or go back. He gave the standard reasons for deserting this job: being bossed around, treated unfairly, and being made to feel 'useless'. Especially striking was a point he made about the drawback of working outside of Zandspruit. Thatho told me that leaving the settlement early in the morning and returning late at night made it impossible to 'communicate with people'. From Thatho's perspective, working in a job in the formal economy involved a compromise that in his case was too large. Thatho's ability to make a living as a 'connector' required him to constantly tend to relationships, manage risks and seize opportunities as they presented themselves. This mode of interaction is incompatible with the temporal regimentation demanded by low-end service-sector work.

Another important dimension of Thatho's ability to profit from the local economy involves the production of legitimacy. This requires a capacity to deploy different and sometimes divergent moral codes, rules, and norms

depending on the specific circumstances or interaction at hand. For instance, the impression he needs to cultivate with his customers – as an entrepreneur with the community’s interests at heart, rather than a social bandit – is not the same image he needs to project to local gangsters and vigilante groups. Moreover, the commodification of electricity ‘from below’ is not the automatic outcome of the state’s failure to provide power or of the immense popular demand for electricity. Instead, as demonstrated earlier, it has much to do with the shrewd and creative ‘cultural work’ of connectors like Thatho. Thatho’s masterful deployment of the entrepreneurial discourse is partly responsible for the moral ambivalence that surrounds *izinyoka* connections. He uses the entrepreneurial discourses to give himself a work identity but also to bring his work as a ‘connector’ respectability. He does this to legitimate the extraction of fees from residents while also preserving his self-image amongst a wider public. Even shrewder is his ability to harness the state’s emphasis on cost-recovery to cloak the extraction of rents in moral language.²⁴

²⁴ This cultural work appears to be effective. The widespread support of these ‘connectors’ was especially apparent during a string of protests and events in early 2016. In March 2016, Eskom, the South African electricity public utility, in conjunction with the South African police turned off the power in the area and destroyed the informal electricity infrastructure youth like Thatho have constructed. This was part of a government clamp down on electricity theft. This action sparked violent protests on a scale never seen before in Zandspruit. Over four days of running battles with the police the community’s message was clear: if the state does not electrify the area residents will continue to connect themselves. On the fourth day of the protests, having brought the government to its knees, the power was turned back on. In an ironic twist, the government’s actions gave further legitimacy to the ‘do-it-yourself’ delivery of services by local entrepreneurs like Thatho. By May 2016, with only three months until the local elections, the ANC changed tactics. A Member of the Executive Council (MEC) for Human Settlements at the time told residents that they did have a right to electricity and the state’s responsibility was to ‘connect you legally’. A few days later, the City of Johannesburg announced that it would ‘legalise the illegal’ and most intriguingly wanted to work with the informal connectors to

To make these points is not to ignore that Thatho's turn to the illegal electricity market is animated in part by his conclusion that the formal labour market is more than likely to let him down. It is equally important to note that the present and near future Thatho is building may undermine his longer-term ambitions and more distant future. Thatho dreamed of one day living in a house in the suburbs and enjoying a middle class lifestyle. By investing in a livelihood that was very much tied to Zandspruit he can be seen to perhaps further impede his chances of ever leaving the settlement. It is also a cruel irony that the very privileges that allow Thatho to escape low-end work in the formal labour market also put his life in serious danger. In December 2015, a man in his late 30s who also made a living as a 'connector' was electrocuted and died. Thatho did not like to talk about the inherent dangers of working as a connector or his apprehensions about his future prospects as a 'connector'. It was his neighbor and friend, Kabelo, who spoke about these matters with me more bluntly.

During an afternoon I spent with Kabelo in his shack, he spoke about his uneasiness about Thatho and many of his friends who had embraced the unpredictability and precariousness of the street economy. Kabelo feared that by working as a 'connector' Thatho was perhaps precluding himself from entering the formal economy at a later point in time. He asked me

install pre-paid meters. To date, nothing has come of these pledges with residents continuing to depend upon the informal infrastructure.

rhetorically if Thatho could put *izinyoka* on his CV. Thatho was more optimistic and did not see his engagement in semi-criminal activities as barring him from attaining a job in the police force or starting a ‘legal’ (or more formal) enterprise to benefit from government contracts. The likelihood of either of these proposals is of course a different matter altogether. While Kabelo defended Thatho and many others’ reluctance to take up low-paying jobs in the formal economy he was genuinely concerned that youth who make a living in the local economy, even, and perhaps especially, in the most lucrative niches, ‘forget the systems that will generate you money and a sustainable life’. Thatho was determinedly unspecific about his future plans. He instead emphasised his radical openness to ‘any route’ that would help him get ahead; from a government job to more serious criminal activity.

Performing an educated disposition

Given Joel’s failure to secure a white-collar job or have any traction in the township economy, one might surmise he lacks the resources, skills, and traits required by both economies. Yet I want to suggest that this verdict overlooks the importance of conceiving of cultural capital as a stylistic competency that is actively cultivated and worked on. From this perspective, the central question is less about assessing Joel’s relative success or failure at securing white-collar work. Rather we must ask *why*, despite recurrent failure to convert his academic merit into economic capital, Joel continues to invest material resources, energies and talents into presenting himself as someone who *is* educated – a disposition that in fact transcends his actual qualifications. Joel’s efforts to perform an educated subjectivity are

thus not wholly different from Thatho's attempt to fashion himself as an entrepreneur.

What makes the value Joel places on education especially interesting is the fact that many of the other youth I got to know – with the exact same school-leaving qualification – doubt its value and question the usefulness of furthering their studies. Despite Joel's failure to complete the diploma in public management or begin the first-year classes of a law degree he had registered for, he often made reference to the fact that he had 'grade 12' and had studied at university. He saw his educational achievements and his desire to further them as distinguishing him from youth who dropped out of school and were impatient when it came to finding work and improving their lives. Again, there are long historical echoes here. As Clive Glaser (2000) observed in his book *Bo-Tsotsi*, writing about the gangs of Soweto between 1930 and 1976, the gang and the school offered two competing spheres for masculine assertion and respectability. With grade 12 and further studies under his belt, he told me he was 'looking up' when it came to jobs compared to someone who 'stopped with grade 10'. It was not only his comments about education that demonstrated this disposition but a range of other behaviours and preferences. These included the clothes he wore, to the importance he gave to following the news and reading books (his favourite was George Orwell's *Animal Farm*), and attending church.

I picked up on Joel's efforts to perform an educated disposition on the very first day we met in the church hall. Not only was Joel smartly dressed, he had brought pen and paper, and maybe most revealingly, he had arrived

before the start time. Unlike most of the youth in the first two rows who had been cajoled into attending, as to not embarrass the organisers, Joel had arrived a good hour and fifteen minutes before the event began. This signalled his punctuality and desire to learn. Much like his preference for dropping off his CV in person, and requesting to talk with the boss directly, he hoped these verbal and non-verbal cues would leave an impression and help him to stand out from the thousands of jobless youth like him. Joel's emphasis on his educational abilities also provided a justification for his refusal to take up the most menial jobs. Thus his belief in the value of education must be seen in relation to his aspirations, and his need to retain some semblance of agency over his future.

The value Joel places on education is closely tied to his belief in meritocracy – that jobs or economic rewards should go to those who are talented and hardworking. Yet, this lay in direct tension with Joel's view that merit is so often not the basis upon which people acquire jobs and accumulate wealth. Joel was particularly aggrieved that individuals without skills but with political connections secure government jobs, contracts and tenders. During one of our conversations about his difficulties finding work Joel launched into an attack on the government. The main problem with the government, he insisted, is that it does not go after 'talent', but instead gives jobs to people with 'connections'. In his view, working for the government was 'easy'. If you fail to turn up for work, he said, 'no one will complain'. Joel's sentiments reflect a widely held view that those working in government do not get their jobs on the basis of effort or competence and would keep their jobs irrespective of how hard they work. The fact that many leaders, especially under Jacob Zuma's presidency, have amassed significant amounts

of wealth without any personal investment in education fed into many of my interlocutors' cynicism about the value of qualifications.

Joel's belief in the value of education and meritocracy provided him with an explanatory framework to make sense of his failure to get ahead. This is itself a cultural resource. Such a framework was especially apparent in our discussions around corruption – something Joel brought up on many occasions. Joel had intimate knowledge of the reality of government corruption and patronage from his time at the TVET College. These experiences destabilised his views on meritocracy and yet it was his belief in meritocracy that underpinned his critique of the awarding of jobs, especially in the government, on the basis of connections and not merit or competence. Joel is aware of the hollowness of the meritocratic myth. His life is testament to the fact that many young people are structurally excluded and marginalised irrespective of how educated or hard they work. It is thus vital to stress the aspirational nature of his views that, as his return to the supermarket in 2015 make clear, hold little prospect of benefitting him in the future.

There is of course a more pragmatic element to all of this. Joel is locked out of opportunities to make a living in the local economy. He lacks the connections, skills and resources one needs to access the more lucrative but improvised livelihoods in the local economy. Moreover, he is hostile towards the kinds of risk-taking that are synonymous with criminal activities and entrepreneurship. He perhaps also lacks the internal wherewithal, or desire, to even imagine himself making Thatho's stylistic choice. Instead,

Joel desires the stability and predictability he associates with a ‘proper’ job. Much like the lower-caste men in India who Jeffrey et al (2005, 32) describe, Joel responded to the failure of his education to secure him white-collar work by paradoxically investing further in the value of education. Education is thus both a cultural distinction that provides a reason for his failure to get ahead and a ‘form of achieved social identity’ to conserve his self-respect in the present.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to examine the distribution of agency and to understand how different youth’s livelihood choices and trajectories are produced. By comparing the choices and trajectories of Joel and Thatho, a recent migrant and more-established resident, I have shown the ways in which individual actions and pathways, including the likelihood of someone escaping low-paid work are neither arbitrary nor the result of individual choice alone. These different trajectories offer insight into the range of social, economic and cultural factors that mediate young men’s economic choices and longer-term trajectories.

Thatho and Joel’s choices not only reflect their different family histories – including where they grew up and the nature of their household and kin relations – but also their place within the settlement’s history and its complicated matrix of property relations. A similar idea underlines Daniel Mains’ (2012) study in Ethiopia that shows being unemployed or employed has as much to do with young men’s access to family wealth and social connections as it does with the availability of jobs. Thatho and Joel’s life

histories highlight that the charged distinction of insiders and outsiders is packed with all sorts of meanings, and does not simply map onto the South African/foreign distinction, or the distinction between employed and unemployed. The distinction does, however, underscore one of the most important sources of stratification in Zandspruit: local ties and social relationships. It also points to the significance of citizenship in a profoundly local sense – in terms of being of a place – to understanding local forms of social differentiation, on the one hand, and the organisation of the labour market and local economy, on the other.

The significance of social connections and local conceptions of citizenship to understanding people's economic lives and decision-making also has implications for how we think about class stratification in South Africa, and the longstanding debate between Peter Alexander (2013) and Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass (2005, 2015) about whether the long-term unemployed constitute an underclass or not. Seekings and Nattrass argue that those who lack wage employment, and are unlikely to find a job, constitute an 'underclass'. My research suggests there is a much wider spectrum of 'classes', for want of a better term, in Zandspruit and that having a wage is only one of many ways in which people get by. The informal economy is not synonymous with precariousness and destitution but exists as an economic terrain shaped by power dynamics and forms of differentiation (Di Nunzio 2012; Meagher 2011). Such a view complicates a conception of class stratification that assumes those outside of wage work form an undifferentiated 'underclass' at the bottom of the social ladder.

The argument I offer here does not mean I overlook that elements of precariousness and unpredictability pervade the informal economy. While Thatho's ability to ditch low-wage work and his livelihood as a 'connector' is tied to his relatively privileged position within the community it is still a decision made from a position of deep constraint. If 'good' jobs were on offer it would not be necessary for young men like Thatho to find alternative modes of getting by to free themselves of the hierarchal relations of the mainstream economy where racial inequality is still closely felt. While being a 'connector' allows Thatho to control his own time and make a (relatively stable) living on his own terms, it is nonetheless a choice with a high chance of running counter to his own long-term ambitions. To put this differently, Thatho's relative privileges and sense of autonomy might also underpin his continued marginality, and potentially even his death (Bourgois 2003; Willis 1977).

It is also equally important to recognise that Joel's 'patience' and belief (or perhaps the hope) that his hard work and perseverance will pay off has the effect of being what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls 'cruel optimism'. While I recognise that Joel's emphasis on his work-ethic and educational abilities might be the only strategy he has to try and stand out amongst the thousands of jobless youth, it is impossible to ignore the contradiction between Joel's idea(l) of work as a source of security and upward mobility and his, and, many others', experience of wage work as nothing other than precarious, exploitative and degrading.

This chapter has shown how the impact of precarity and unemployment are mediated by various social and cultural factors as well as one's position within a highly localised political economy. This chapter has demonstrated that to stay away from work in the formal labour market is a choice not all young men in Zandspruit have access to. It is a choice that takes local networks and know-how, access to property, and various kinds of social and cultural capital. It is perhaps not impossible then to view unemployment – in the sense of those who wilfully avoid low-wage jobs – as a choice available to a relatively privileged class of people within the social terrain of Zandspruit.

Chapter 5

The negotiation of social obligations and the demise of patriarchal authority

Introduction

I was driving in my car with Eric to the nearby Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) to escape the summer heat for an interview when a debate about money in intimate relations kicked-off on the talk show radio '702'. The radio host was interviewing the organiser of a 'girlfriend allowance' seminar that was to take place the following day. The organiser Mandisa Mahlobo, a self-identified 'seduction expert', explained to the radio host that the seminar sought to assist women in soliciting money from their male partners. The interview caused an immediate backlash with callers phoning in and accusing Mahlobo of teaching women to 'prostitute' themselves instead of empowering them. Others phoned in to support the summit. One woman stressed that men need to 'play their role' as providers even if women are financially independent.

As we pulled up at the KFC, I asked Eric what he thought about the idea of a 'girlfriend allowance'. He quipped that he did not see the need for women to attend the seminar and hoped Mahlobo would instead teach women to not treat their boyfriends as a source of money. 'It's a relationship not a job', he said, before telling me that it had become 'like fashion' for women to have 'a boyfriend for airtime [and one for] transportation to wherever you want to go'. The conversation quickly shifted to his ex-girlfriend who he accused of holding him 'ransom'. When I asked what he meant he

explained how his ex-girlfriend (and mother of his daughter) had threatened to break up with him if he did not find a steady and better-paying job. 'If a man cannot provide [then] they [women] will go and get it from another man', he said in a matter-of-fact way. It was clear from the debate on the radio and my conversation with Eric that the idea of a 'girlfriend allowance' tapped into much wider social anxieties and intense contestations about the changing contours of gender roles, expectations, and hierarchies in contemporary South Africa.

The exchange of money in the form of a 'girlfriend allowance' was understood by my interlocutors as a prerequisite to initiating and maintaining a relationship with a woman and yet, as Eric made clear in our discussion that day, 'providing' for your woman guaranteed neither loyalty nor patriarchal authority. The fact that men increasingly conceptualise their obligations to women in these terms highlights important shifts taking place in gender relations, norms and expectations. It also points to the fact that the transfer of resources from men to women is increasingly between individuals rather than families, and more sporadic rather than occurring throughout the lifecycle. This is tied to the fact that relationships between men and women are increasingly short-term with few transitioning into marriage.

The paradox is that while being a man in South Africa remains inextricably tied up with 'provision', the notion of a male-headed household has if not entirely dissolved been significantly disrupted. During the era of migrant labour the majority of men worked in the mines far away from their

families. They used their wages to save for bridewealth payments and maintained their relationships with their wives and children through regular remittances. This exchange of money allowed men to assert control over a household from afar. The ‘patriarchal bargain’, as Mark Hunter (2010) puts it, involved women – although never completely or unopposed – exchanging some of their independence for financial support. The past few decades have seen the economic foundation of the ‘patriarchal bargain’ erode with profound consequences for patterns of marriage, social obligations, and family formation. My aim in this chapter is to examine the implications of the dissolution of male work and male-led house holding on young men’s social relations, in particular their obligations to their children, and their status as fathers.

I begin the chapter with a brief discussion on the profound shifts taking place in household composition, kinship ties, and gender relations that provides an important backdrop for the rest of this chapter. This is followed by a case study vignette of Senzo to highlight the three most common and defining features of young men’s social lives: unpredictable earnings, competing demands on their resources, and fraught intimate relations. Thirdly, I examine young men’s exercise of choice with regards to fulfilling, contesting, deferring, or, in some cases, evading their obligations to their children. Lastly, I bring the discussion on men’s paternal obligations into a broader discussion on the resilience of the ‘male breadwinner’ ideal alongside the profound reconfiguration of gendered and kinship relations taking place in contemporary South Africa. I show that while some young men seem to have found more egalitarian ways of relating to young women – giving rise to new domestic orders and provisional possibilities – others

view women's increasing independence as a threat to this masculine ideal. Ultimately, by qualifying the overriding view that men are simply abandoning their families and children, I demonstrate the ways in which the 'patriarchal bargain' still has a powerful ideological hold over social relations despite its increasing irrelevance as an organising force in society.

The dissolution of the male-breadwinner

Anthropologists working in Southern Africa have observed for quite some time now the dissolution of the close relationship between wage labour, gender, and the constitution of social relations (Cole 2010; Ferguson 1999, 2015; Hunter 2010). One of the most striking changes to take place within household and kinship structures in South Africa has been the decline in marriage rates. There is evidence that marriage rates began declining in the 1960s and have continued to decline over time (Hunter 2010; Dorrit Posel and Rudwick 2014). The decline in marriage has had profound consequences for the constitution of social ties and affection in South Africa. This is especially apparent in the growing proportion of households headed by women and the fact that increasing numbers of children live with their mothers or maternal kin, often with little contact with their fathers or paternal kin (Bray et al. 2010; Hunter 2006; Morrell and Richter 2006; Seekings 2008). National data shows that as many as 43 per cent of all black South African children live with their mother but not their father (Hall and Sambu 2017).

These changes in the constitution of kinship ties reflect important shifts in the flow of resources. This includes the growing significance of social grants

– which go predominantly to mothers and the elderly – to people’s livelihoods (Dubbeld 2013; Ferguson 2015). Another important factor is the growing feminisation of the labour market. There is evidence that growing numbers of women are entering the labour market, albeit at the lower and poorly paid end (Casale and Posel 2002). The increase in the number of women entering the work force is often overlooked given the overall unemployment rate is significantly higher amongst women than men. National statistics, however, indicate the gap between male and female unemployment (amongst youth age 15-34) has narrowed from 9.6 percentage points in 2008 to 6.9 in 2015 (StatsSA 2015, 11). The decline has been especially noticeable in Gauteng province – from 10.9 percentage points in 2008 to 5.1 percentage points in 2015 (StatsSA 2015, 12).

The decline in marriage rates has occurred alongside another shift toward smaller and more numerous households (Hunter and Posel 2012). This trend is intensified in urban areas and more especially in informal settlements like Zandspruit. Research has shown that a distinct feature of informal settlements is the growing number of small households (Hunter and Posel 2012). In Gauteng province, for example, 25 per cent of people living in informal dwellings are ‘living solo’ (GCRO 2013). This is 2.5 times more than people living in formal dwellings. While the rates of non-marital co-habitation remain low overall, especially amongst women who are mothers, the rates of non-marital co-habitation are significantly higher amongst those in urban informal settlements than those in rural or more formal areas (Dorrit Posel and Rudwick 2014). A number of my interlocutors had lived with a girlfriend, normally in a rented shack, for a period of time but these cohabiting arrangements were often short-lived

with few transitioning into marriage or a more stable partnership. The decrease in household size must therefore be seen in the context of low-marriage rates, high rates of migrancy, and, equally important, a lack of adequate housing in urban areas (Hunter and Posel 2012).

The vast majority (87%) of the one hundred young people I surveyed were unmarried but just over half (52%) had one or more children. Twenty-five per cent of these same youth lived alone and over half (56%) lived in households of two or fewer. In most cases young men's children lived with their mother or maternal kin, often in another province. Only a handful of the young men I got to know lived with their children on a day-to-day basis. This not only reflects wider national trends but also helps explain why young men are more likely to live alone compared to women (StatsSA 2016, 23).

One of the overarching messages stemming from this body of work is the growing irrelevance of the 'patriarchal bargain' to the organisation of social relations and ties. There is a pervasive view in South Africa that young men are failing to support their families and meet their obligations to their children. Throughout my research in Zandspruit I heard young men described as 'run[ning] away from their responsibilities' and failing to 'make a commitment' to their children. Bernard Dubbeld observes that young men in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal are increasingly 'viewed with suspicion' for having little to offer financially and for evading their domestic and paternal responsibilities (2013, 203). This theme is also particularly evident in the dominant portrayal of young men as being 'stuck' in a protracted state of

non-adult and thus unable to forge independent households or financially support a family (Cole 2004; Durham 2000; Hansen 2005; Honwana 2012; Masquelier 2013; Vigh 2006).

The lives of young men in Zandspruit reveal a much more complicated picture than that offered by the dominant portrayal of young men as ‘stuck’ or ‘failing’. Young men are not stuck in some kind of ‘limbo’ or extended state of non-adult. They are instead making adult lives for themselves that are defined indefinitely by precarious earnings and fluid and shifting social relationships. Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that young men are *not* severely constrained in their ability to meet their social obligations, and attain the ‘traditional’ markers of adulthood: to build a home, get married, and reliably support a spouse and kids. My point is rather that the depiction of young men as ‘failing’ and ‘irresponsible’ is too crude and homogenising. Young men are not marrying and are unlikely to do so but they are also not without adult responsibilities. Nor have young men simply turned their backs on their families and children. Something more complex is happening in the shape and flow of resources, and the constitution of social ties and affection.

Case study vignette: Senzo

I met Senzo in June 2015. He was 27, unmarried, and had been unemployed for six months after abandoning his job as a driver in the midst of a disciplinary process. Senzo had fathered two daughters (age 8 and 3) but lived with neither of his children or their mothers. At the time of my

fieldwork, Senzo lived alone in a one-room rented shack except for the occasional evening or weekend when his new girlfriend stayed over.

Senzo was born in a village in Northern Kwa-Zulu Natal to a teenage mother. His grandmother who worked as a domestic worker in Johannesburg raised him. In 2001, when Senzo was thirteen, his grandmother purchased a stand in the most congested section of Zandspruit (as discussed in Chapter Two). She was one of the first occupants in this section of the settlement. Neither of Senzo's biological parents played any significant role in his (or his sister's) life. He had intermittent contact with his mother (who died in 2007) and only met his father for the first time in 2006 at the age of sixteen.

Senzo finished school in 2008. His first daughter was born the same year. 'I didn't plan for the baby but the baby was born', he told me, describing how he had a 'one-night stand' with his daughter's mother on a school trip. His daughter went to live with her maternal grandmother and aunt. In 2009, before beginning his studies at the University of Johannesburg, he moved into an independent shack in his grandmother's yard. Towards the end of 2010, after dropping out of university due to a lack of funds, Senzo got his first job as a fitness instructor at a local gym. 'I was chowing nice money', he told me, recalling the thrill of earning a relatively good salary (approximately R6000 (\$430) a month). He bought a second-hand car, opened a store account at Truworths (an upmarket clothing store), and began supporting his grandmother with groceries each month. In one of our conversations he equated his obligation to his grandmother to a tithe: 'If you

are working nice I believe ten per cent must go to the church but I'm not going to church, I'm not a church fan, so I rather take my ten per cent and buy something nice for my granny.'

A few months into his job he decided to move out of his grandmother's yard and rent a one-room shack in another section of the settlement. This decision was largely driven by his desire to live with his girlfriend (Busi) who was living with her aunt on a plot not too far from Zandspruit. Co-habiting was a big step. It signalled to their respective families and friends that they were serious about staying together. Within a year of Busi and Senzo moving in together, they became parents to a girl called Lerato. Senzo lost his job when his daughter was nine months old because the gym where he worked closed down. 'I was down and out quick quick', he said, describing the difficulties he had paying rent, keeping up with outstanding debts, and supporting his girlfriend and child. It took Senzo seven months to find another job. This period of unemployment put significant strain on their relationship. Senzo told me that Busi threatened to break up with him on a number of occasions if he did not find another job. One day in 2014, after a fight about money, she packed her bags and left.

His girlfriend took their child to live with her mother in Mpumalanga. In 2015, when we met, he had not seen his younger daughter (Lerato) for fourteen months. His ex had got a protection order issued to deny him access to his daughter. Senzo thought the protection order was a vindictive move to punish him for not supporting their child and to guilt-trip him into doing so. In one conversation Senzo told me: 'She [the mother] comes to me

saying my child doesn't have pampers [nappies], please give us money. And I said, no no no. I can't every time give you money and I don't even know where the child is'. He made similar remarks about the mother of his first child who he described as only contacting him to 'demand something'. Senzo had very little contact with his older daughter for the first five years of her life. The child's maternal grandmother and aunt who took care of her did not contact Senzo and allegedly barred him from visiting his child. This changed when his older daughter moved back to Johannesburg to live with her mother and start primary school. The mother started contacting Senzo more regularly to make demands for assistance for his older daughter's school fees and added expenses. 'When I see the phone call I just switch off my phone', Senzo told me in 2015. Senzo was at once distressed by his inability to provide for his daughters but continued to distance himself from them.

It was easier for Senzo to evade his ex's demands for support when he was without work and getting by through donations, loans, and small sums of money he attained through his relationships with family, friends, and neighbours. For most of my fieldwork Senzo stayed afloat with support from his sister who worked as a receptionist, his grandmother who had a pension and made extra money renting backrooms, and a number of friends who helped him out with R10 or R20 here and there. In August 2015 Senzo got a part-time job at the local primary school as a sports coach. Busi's (Senzo's ex) demands for money increased soon after she heard about Senzo's new job. She did not waste her time calling Senzo who had ignored her calls in the past. Instead, she arrived at his shack with her uncle early one Saturday morning. She was incensed when she found another woman at Senzo's place

who she accused of ‘eating’ Senzo’s money. Ironically, although Senzo’s ex did not know this at the time, the woman Senzo was seeing was in a much firmer financial position than he was. She worked as a cashier at a petrol station nearby and lived with her parents in a suburban house in Ruimsig. It did not occur to his ex that the woman she was swearing at had in fact been the one supporting Senzo and not the other way around. Insults and accusations turned into punches. His ex laid an assault charge at the local police station and Senzo was arrested later that day. He ended up spending a week in prison until his sister bailed him out after payday. The police officer that arrested Senzo told him that his ex was ‘causing trouble’ opening a case against him because what she really wanted was to ‘come and stay with you’. When the police officer suggested he get back together with his ex he said: ‘No I cant. I can’t... I wanted to before but no.’

The case study of Senzo is instructive for thinking about the predicament young men find themselves in, characterised by unpredictable earnings, competing demands for financial support, and fragile intimate relations.

The economic situation of many of my interlocutors was characterised by insecure and discontinuous work and the stitching together of various strategies to generate money. Between 2011 and 2014, Senzo had two relatively well paying jobs, first as a fitness instructor and then as a driver, but also experienced two periods of unemployment (of five and eight months). For the bulk of my fieldwork Senzo was unemployed and was getting by through small jobs and financial assistance from his grandmother, sister, and friends. During this time he was not making any regular financial

contribution to his grandmother (something he had only done when he was in more regular employment) nor was he supporting either of his children.

The consequence of young men's unpredictable earnings is that it is quite common for men to shift in and out of being providers and dependents themselves. This has implications for young men's intimate relations, householding arrangements, and patterns of distribution and care. Many of my interlocutors' intimate relationships with women for instance had ended, at least in part, because of financial woes. Senzo's girlfriend, for example, moved out soon after Senzo lost his job. Likewise, Eric's ex-girlfriend, as noted earlier, moved out and threatened to break up with him to pressurise him into finding a better-paying job. It is the conditioning of men's relationships with women, and access to their children, on their capacity to 'provide' that undergirds much of the conflict between young men and women. On the one hand, young men assert their place as 'providers' and view provision as being central to being men. Men understood their obligations to their children, lovers, and families as one of the prime areas for them to acquire or maintain a sense of masculine respect or status. On the other hand, young men complained bitterly about women's demands for resources, and resented their status as men and fathers being primarily judged on their ability to provide.

The case study of Senzo makes clear that young men's economic decisions cannot be viewed in isolation from their social obligations. Having a job can create, or rather, activate obligations that might have previously been dormant. This was evident when the mothers of Senzo's two children made

their demands for financial support more frequent and insistent when he got the job at the local school. This exemplar allows us to recognise why, at least in certain circumstances, the absence of a job might be viewed positively as a shield from the social claims attached to a wage. One of my interlocutors explained that he would ‘rather not have anything than suffer while I’m earning’ by having to give away a large portion of his hard-earned salary to family obligations. Some young men, as we will see in the case of a man duping the maintenance court later on, deliberately construct themselves as being ‘unemployed’ to abscond from their social obligations and responsibilities.

It is not only the unpredictability of young men’s financial capacity that makes it difficult for them to form independent households and provide regular support to their families and children. Young men are also trying to delineate and discern between competing desires and demands on their limited resources. These demands come from the mothers of their children, their current intimate partners, along with their parents, siblings, cousins and friends. Senzo’s situation was not uncommon. The majority of my interlocutors who had children were no longer in relationships with the mother of their children. In most cases, my interlocutor’s children lived with their mothers or maternal kin. This arrangement did not, however, automatically cut men off from their children or from the expectations of material support. Instead, as will become clear in the following section, understanding how young men maintain ties with their children, or even when they choose not to, impels us to attend to the increasingly fraught relationship between men and women.

Negotiating fatherhood and paternal obligations

Financial provision is still considered the primary obligation of fathers. Most of my interlocutors, for example, associated ‘good’ or ‘real’ fathers with those who provided material support to their children. Arnold emphasised that men’s responsibilities to their children are all ‘from the pocket [wallet]’. ‘You can’t be a real father without cash’, he told me. Likewise, Senzo insisted that a man could not be considered a father if he did not provide economically for their child. ‘When a child comes into the world they come naked’, he told me, ‘you cannot be a father when the child is naked’. Senzo’s view that men should provide economically did not prevent him from criticising the mothers of his children for only contacting him to ‘demand’ money. ‘They won’t phone me saying we miss you, come and visit us’, he told me, ‘No, no no. The only time they give me a call is when there is a reason [like a] school trip or something’.

The emphasis on economic provision exists alongside an emerging public discourse that emphasises the importance of fathers providing care and love to their children.²⁵ In late 2015, Senzo posted a picture on Facebook of a man holding his young daughter who is bundled inside his worn and shabby

²⁵ This must be seen in relation to a number of campaigns – spearheaded by non-governmental organisations such as MenEngage – that try to encourage more care-related forms of fatherhood. For instance: ‘My Dad Can’ is a local media campaign that forms part of the international MenCare campaign being spearheaded by MenEngage. An earlier iteration of this was the campaign Brothers For Life. It was launched in 2009 by, amongst others, the South African National AIDS Council, John Hopkins Health and Education in South Africa and Sonke Gender Justice.

jacket. The picture caption read: 'A poor available father is better than a rich absent father'. The comments on Senzo's Facebook page were revealing. A number agreed with the sentiment. Senosi commented as follows: 'what makes a good father is love and care'. Others disagreed. For example, Refilwe simply noted that 'love doesn't put food on the table'. The debate that ensued on Senzo's Facebook page reflects a growing appetite amongst young men and women to reconsider the important role fathers can have in their children's lives.

A number of my interlocutors emphasised the importance of fathers playing the 'fatherly role'. Senzo, for example, told me that he has a right to 'be with' his younger daughter even if he cannot support her financially. Even if I don't have money I can still have access to the child, to be with the child', Senzo told me. 'It's a matter of me bonding with the child'. This was seen to involve spending time with one's children and building emotional connections. Another interlocutor of mine, Prince, whose daughter was four at the time of my fieldwork, explained the importance of fathers 'being there' for their children and taking an active interest in their development and education.

I think it is significant that most of my interlocutors were raised by their mothers or grandmothers and had little contact (if any) with their fathers. This is worth emphasising because it demonstrates a longer history of men being uprooted from their families and excluded from the distribution of care, and of maternal kin, and often-single women, raising children that stands in contrast to the traditional patriarchal family structure (G'sell 2016;

Lee 2009). I got the impression that many of my interlocutors wanted to save their own children from the pain they experienced growing up without the active involvement of their fathers. Senzo, for example, feared his own children might hold a grudge towards him not dissimilar to the one he holds towards his own absent father. In a sense, the experience of having a distant or absent father had engendered, at least in some of my interlocutors, a desire to be different.

Customary versus maintenance laws

The aspiration to be an involved father is mediated by a number of factors. While men's financial situation is perhaps the primary factor, a father's proximity to his child, his relationship with his child's mother, and various cultural processes also play an important role (Human Sciences Research Council & Sonke Gender Justice 2018; Hunter 2006; Mavungu, Thomson-de Boor, and Mphaka 2013; Morrell and Richter 2006; Morrell et al. 2016). The fact that men's access to their children was regularly limited was not only the consequence of men's failure to provide financial support but also a result of the often-fraught relationship between the father and the mother and/or the child's maternal kin. It was not uncommon, as we saw with Senzo, for young men to distance themselves from their child(ren) due to the shame attached to not being able to provide. It was also not infrequent to hear stories of young men being barred from visiting or spending time with their children. Senzo, for example, was prevented from visiting his younger daughter when she lived with her maternal grandmother in Mpumalanga.

In several interviews, when I followed up with clarifying questions about the reasons why my interlocutors were prohibited from seeing their children, they often spoke about their own (and other men's) failure to pay 'damages'. The *inhlawulo* payment or 'damages' (the word my interlocutors use) is the customary payment that is paid to a women's family when a child is born out of wedlock. Under customary law, a father's rights to his children is linked to the payment of bridewealth (*ilobola*) or 'damages'. If *ilobola* is paid (in full or in part) the child belongs to the father's family. If it is not paid the child belongs to the mother's family. In a context of declining marriages, where the majority of children are born out of wedlock, the smaller payment of 'damages' (usually a few thousand rand) has become intimately tied to the recognition of a father's paternity and his rights to his child (Hunter 2015, 1298). There is some evidence that the failure to pay 'damages' may prevent a child's father from seeing and visiting their child. This appears to be much more common when the child lives with maternal relatives (Human Sciences Research Council & Sonke Gender Justice 2018, 22). In a similar vein to Mark Hunter's recent work (2015, 2016), my research suggests the recognition of paternity rights is becoming more flexible in a context where marriage and stable work are increasingly rare.

One of my interlocutors called Tshepo, for example, fathered a child with his girlfriend Lerato who he had been living with for more than two years. Before Lerato moved into Tshepo's shack, he sought the 'permission' of his girlfriend's family. This involved discussions and the exchange of what Hunter (2016) has called 'bridewealth-related payments'. It reflected his desire to do things 'right', as he put it, but also the couple's intention to stay together. This process not only legitimised their co-habitation but also

appears to have helped recognise Tshepo's rights to his son. When I asked Tshepo if he had paid 'damages' he told me that his girlfriend's family did not require this of him because he had sought their permission before Lerato and him moved in together. The payment to legitimate their cohabitation appears to have stood in for *inhlawulo*. This arrangement cannot be taken as typical. For example, while Senzo's girlfriend's family were aware of their cohabitation he did not seek her family's permission.

It does, however, suggest a degree of understanding on the part of some women's families regarding the financial challenges that prevent many young men like Tshepo from paying *ilobola* and 'damages'; and perhaps also an appreciation of the importance of father-involvement. Interestingly, it was Tshepo's family, and especially his uncles, who were more disapproving of them living together. They felt it incorrect that Tshepo had not paid 'damages', and disliked the fact that his son had not taken his surname.

The customary system of recognising paternal rights exists in tension with the expectation, strengthened by the child maintenance laws, that biological fathers must contribute to the upkeep of their children irrespective of the status of the relationship with the mother, or for that matter, whether 'damages' have been paid or not. Mark Hunter (2015, 1298) makes a distinction between 'social' and 'biological' fatherhood, and argues that the latter has gained more prominence in recent decades with the child maintenance laws. Some young men justified their failure to provide support on the grounds that the child's mother (or maternal kin) had barred them from seeing their child. It was difficult to verify if this was really the case or

not. My research does suggest that women limit men's access to their children (and, in some cases, even deny the father's paternity) in an attempt to punish men for not providing support or strong-arm them into doing so. The mothers of my interlocutors' children often went to great lengths to coax men into supporting their children, including, in a limited number of cases, going the legal route with women taking men to the maintenance court to demand support. The maintenance system has been implemented in such a way, as Grace Khunou (2006, 2012) points out, that it has reinforced the idea that men's role is primarily one of financial provision.

Most of my interlocutor's economic situations are uncertain and change over time. This makes it difficult for young men, even if they wanted to, to provide regular or uninterrupted support to their children. Paternal obligations are thus the site of intense contestations over gender, obligations, and 'rights'. In the following section I draw attention to the ways in which my interlocutors negotiate their social obligations to their children, and the tensions they reveal with respect to the changing interrelationship of money, sex, affect and power (Cole 2010; G'sell 2016).

Strategies of connection and disconnection

Only a minority of my interlocutors lived with their children and in the majority of cases young men were no longer in a relationship with the mother of their child. How do young men in such circumstances maintain ties with their children and negotiate their status as fathers? It is impossible to provide a full review of the ways young men maintain ties with their children, or choose not to. Instead I have chosen to draw attention to some

of the strategies men use to fulfil, defer, or in some cases, evade their obligations to their children. I argue that while most men sought to maintain some relationship with their children, few were able, or willing, to provide regular support to the mothers or caregivers of their (often non-resident) children. Instead, I draw attention to the sporadic transfer of resources and the increasingly provisional forms of connection that characterise men's relationships with their children.

Regular support and creative collaborations

One of the few young men I got to know who was in a relatively stable co-habiting union was Tshepo who, as noted earlier, asked his girlfriend's family for permission before they moved in together. I first met Tshepo in 2011 when he lived alone in a shack his mother had bought before her death in 2010. He was single, did not have any children, and was unemployed except for the occasional days when he worked as a gardener. We stayed in touch between 2012-2014. In mid-2013 he got a job as a petrol attendant. In June 2015, when I returned for fieldwork, he was still working at the garage but was now living with his girlfriend and their ten-month-old son (Nzwako). We met at Motswako (the buy-and-braai restaurant in Zandspruit) shortly after my return. Sitting on the tiled ledge at the back I asked him how things were with Lerato and their son. 'We're still living here [and] eish, it's not good', he said, sharing his anxieties about raising a child in Zandspruit and his struggle to make ends meet. Before Nzwako was born Lerato had a part-time job with a catering company. Though their wages were small their combined income covered their everyday expenses and allowed Tshepo to send money to his unemployed brothers and pubescent sister who also depended on him. This became more difficult

once Lerato left her job and their child was born. ‘Even though I’m working’, he told me, ‘I’m always left with nothing [...] sometimes I feel like I’m drowning’. It was clear that his obligations to his girlfriend, son, and siblings weighed heavily upon him. In 2016, Tshepo started running a car wash business on his off-days and over the weekends to supplement his income.

On one of Tshepo’s days off I sat with him at the car wash stand with his son on my lap. He spoke about his struggle to reconcile his obligations to his siblings, girlfriend and child, and his aspirations to leave the squatter camp. Lerato and he were struggling to live off Tshepo’s salary. The previous month he had taken out a loan to send money to his siblings for groceries. This reality prompted Lerato to begin looking for work again. In October 2016, Lerato found a job as a cashier at a grocery store. Their son went to live with Lerato’s sister (in Cosmo City) to allow Lerato to take up the job. The arrangement was such that Tshepo paid Lerato’s sister R300 (\$20) each month for taking care of their child and Lerato bought nappies and porridge from her wages. Tshepo’s car wash business made visiting his son more difficult. During another afternoon we spent together he communicated his regret about spending so little time with his son, and his sadness at having missed seeing Nzwako take his first few steps.

It was not uncommon for children to live with a maternal aunt or grandparent, it was much less common, at least amongst my interlocutors, for men, as was the case with Tshepo, to still be in a relationship with the mother of their child or share the day-to-day costs of raising a child. In many

cases, the relationship between men and the mothers of their children were short-lived and very often conflict-ridden. This made it nearly impossible for me to see my interlocutor's interact with their children. It also altered how young men support their children. Many young men were hesitant to give money directly to the mothers of their children (or the mother's relatives) if they were no longer in a romantic or sexual relationship. They instead sought out other ways of supporting their children. This took different forms – from school fees to irregular gifts – depending on the financial status of the father and their relationship with the mother. Eric's relationship with his ex-partner allows us to grasp why men preferred supporting their children through school fees (or other direct forms of support) than giving money to their children's mothers (and often) ex-partners.

Eric (age 30) lived with his mother and made a living running a small IT business and renting back rooms (see Chapter Four). Eric had a five-year old daughter who – at the time of my fieldwork – lived with his ex-partner (Naledi). Eric and Naledi met in 2010 and began dating soon after. They lived together with their daughter in the front room of his mother's house from 2013-2015. In early 2015, a few months before I began my fieldwork, his girlfriend (who worked at a café) moved out with their daughter. She went to live with her sister in a flat in Roodepoort. It was Eric who told me his ex-girlfriend had held him 'ransom' at the KFC. In further conversations, Eric explained that Naledi's threats to break up with him were also a challenge for him to 'prove' his commitment to them. Naledi wanted Eric to get a better paying job so he could pay *ilobola* and afford for them to move out of his mother's house. Naledi hoped that her decision to

move out would push him to get a better job. It is vital to stress that while Naledi wanted Eric to ‘provide’ for them, she was also adamant about earning her own money and not being entirely dependent on him.

It was not clear what the status of Eric and Naledi’s relationship was for much of my fieldwork. Not long after Naledi moved out Eric suspected her of cheating on him. Despite both of them getting involved in other relationships during my fieldwork, Eric had not closed off the possibility of them getting back together. He was, however, reluctant to give money to Naledi to take care of his child after she had moved out and got involved with other men. Eric instead offered to pay for his daughter’s day-care and, as of January 2016, paid R500 (\$35) each month towards her school fees at a low-cost private school in Roodepoort. This regular payment was integral to Eric having more consistent access to his child. His daughter occasionally came to stay with him and his mother for a weekend, and would usually spend some time in Zandspruit during the school holidays. It became clear from our conversations that Eric was much more willing to support his child through school fees, that he paid directly to the school, than he was giving money to his ex who he resented for leaving him for another man. As Mark Hunter (2014, 2015) has recently argued, the payment of school fees is one of the primary ways for men to maintain links with their non-resident children and acquire a certain amount of respect.

‘Daddy weekends’ and Christmas gifts

Tshepo and Eric’s regular financial support of their children was not typical amongst my interlocutors. Many of the young men I got to know with

children did *not* make a regular contribution to their children's up-keep. Some lacked the resources to do so. Others had several competing demands on their resources from intimate partners, other children, and various family members. Still others simply refused to support their children. In the place of regular provision, most young men sought to maintain their social ties with their children through irregular or once-off gifts and sporadic visits. As noted earlier, Senzo's relationship with his first daughter was limited to short meet-ups at shopping malls where, as he put it, he is expected to 'buy nice ice-creams and shoes' for his daughter. Senzo often expressed his frustration at only being able to spend time with his child if he could 'spend' money. Men's precarious economic situation meant that a number of my interlocutors purposefully avoided seeing their children. They wanted to avoid the humiliation of not being able to buy their child a gift or offer financial support. The result was men not seeing their children for long stretches of time. In a few instances men were estranged from their children altogether. The separation was not always due to an absolute lack of resources but instead constrained by young men being caught between a desire to 'fix' or 'upgrade' their own lives and an obligation to support their family and children. The tension between upward mobility and social obligations (sometimes referred to as a 'black tax') is taken up in more detail in Chapter Six.

It became quite clear during my fieldwork that while young men often bemoaned that women limited their time with their child to short meet-ups, the purchase of irregular gifts was in fact the only way young men with irregular incomes *could* support their children. Moreover, these trips and purchases provided tangible evidence that they were neither completely

‘useless’ nor had they abandoned their children altogether. The gifts of new clothes or shoes not only signalled a relationship between father and child but also a desire on the part of men to be more involved in their children’s lives. A number of my interlocutors bought their children new clothes or shoes for Christmas or to congratulate and encourage them for doing well at school.

A number of my interlocutors posted pictures on social media of them out with their children at a fast food restaurant like Burger King or at a shopping mall. One of my interlocutors, Sibongile, posted two pictures of his daughter (who lives with her mother in Rustenburg) and him at a shopping mall in Johannesburg with a bag of clothes he had bought her. The first picture had the caption: ‘this daughter of mine humbles me, she is the reason for my hustle. Daddy loves you.’ The second picture had the following caption: ‘[My daughter] engaging me on the matter of her benefits regarding her performance of school’. These posts provided a way for Sibongile to demonstrate his efforts to see his daughter and ‘spend money’ on her. Pictures such as this often received positive feedback on social media. ‘Proud of you brother’, read one of the first comments. The purchase of clothes or shoes for one’s child, and the facebook posts that often accompanied these infrequent trips, had important symbolic value in a context where men are regularly criticised for being ‘absent’.

This became especially clear to me when Eric bought his daughter a R700 (\$50) pair of Nike trainers. Eric had been saving for a number of months to purchase these shoes for his daughter. He had told me of his plans to do so

from early September 2015. He gave his daughter the shoes at the beginning of her school holidays when she came to visit him for a few days. This was before she left for her maternal grandmother's house where she spent the bulk of the December holiday. I was genuinely surprised, and perhaps even a little critical, that he had spent so much money on one pair of shoes. I was thus keen to hear what some of his friends and neighbours thought. What motivated such a purchase? Did they approve of it? A good friend of his summed up the view of many of those I spoke to. The shoes, he explained, would have 'everyone talking [about Eric]' at his daughter's school and, most immediately, in the village where his child's maternal grandmother lived. 'You'll be the topic of the day' he said, describing how the mother and her relatives will be happy 'because you spend'. The shoes provide a visible marker of a father's connection with his child, something that is not attained through Eric's routine payment of school fees.

Women did not always view these voluntary and erratic forms of provision favourably. One young woman I got to know referred disparagingly to men's attempts to maintain a relationship with their children through sporadic gifts, and what she called 'Daddy weekends'. Precious (age 26) had a five-year-old daughter. At the time of my fieldwork, Precious worked part-time in retail and lived with her daughter in a house with her mother, stepfather, and two siblings. Her relationship with her daughter's father ended before their child was a year old. 'He wasn't taking responsibility', she told me, 'he was [only] thinking for himself'. The father of her child tried to re-establish contact with Precious and his daughter when the child was three years old. He took Precious and their daughter to the movies or shops on the weekend. It was clear from our conversations that Precious did

not approve of her ex trying to re-assert his status as father through these one-off forms of support. 'If you can't be there all the time then rather keep your money and stay away', she told me. Precious did not want a sexual or romantic relationship with him. She was also reluctant to let her ex- have any significant role in her child's life but had to respect his 'rights' to his child.

Precious was sceptical about her ex's intentions and suspected him of wanting to 'spend money' on the child to get back into a relationship with her rather than any genuine interest or concern for their daughter. Precious told me that her ex still wanted to control her and did not like her dating other men. It is important to note that while many single-mothers might share Precious's concern and not want the father to have any role in their child's life (especially where there is a history of domestic violence), it was rare for women to have the resources, or family support, to be indifferent towards, or refuse, offers of financial support from men, however small or infrequent. In fact, many women spent valuable time and effort hounding, even begging, the father of their children to support them and their children. This could put women (especially poor single-mothers) in a vulnerable position when financial support was seen to involve the reciprocal expectation of a sexual or affective relationship (G'sell 2016).

Evading claims and blaming women

There was also evidence of young men forsaking their paternal obligations. This took different forms. Some young men simply ignored phone calls and requests for support. Others went to great lengths to conceal their income

and evade court-ordered maintenance payments. This was the case with Walter who refused to financially support his two children despite making sizable amounts of money through letting out property in Zandspruit (discussed in Chapter Four). At the time of my fieldwork Walter had fathered two children – a ten-year old boy and a one-year old girl – and lived with neither of them. The mother of his daughter, a woman called Nombusa, had broken up with Walter – who was controlling and physically abusive – shortly before we met. Soon after Nombusa moved back in with her parents, she took Walter to the maintenance court to demand financial support for their child.

Walter resented Nombusa for taking him to the maintenance court and was doing everything he could to avoid paying. He told the court he was unemployed and went to great lengths to obscure the significant sum of money (close to R20 000 (\$1400)) he made each month. It is much easier for the court to enforce the maintenance laws when the defaulting parent has a formal sector job. This is because a garnishee order can be attached to a salary to enforce payment. It is much more difficult to secure maintenance payments when the defaulting parent earns money in the informal economy. Walter was proud to have beaten the system. He told me how he had shifted to operating a ‘cash business’ to avoid any formal record of his earnings. He got his tenants to pay him in cash instead of depositing money into his bank account as he had done before. ‘I was hiding’, he said, ‘I didn’t want the maintenance guys to know what was going on’.

Walter showed very little remorse in our conversations about his attempts to delay court proceedings and abscond from his responsibilities. I got the impression from our conversations that his refusal to pay maintenance was closely tied to the anger he felt towards Nombusa. He wanted to punish her for leaving him and taking him to court. Walter not only evaded his responsibilities to his child — and disputed the maintenance order — but also continuously sought to discredit Nombusa. He could not stomach the fact that she had chosen to leave him. He instead accused her of being unfaithful and promiscuous by ‘having boyfriends outside’. In several of our conversations he accused Nombusa of ‘doing business’ with him. This accusation feeds into a pervasive criticism of women for only entering (or remaining in) relationships with men for material benefit. When I asked Walter what he meant by ‘doing business’ he told me that ‘[women] make a baby with us and then run away and then tell us we must pay maintenance’. His resentment toward Nombusa was also tied to a view that the maintenance system favoured women against men and gave women, in Walter’s words, ‘more power’.

It was not only his view that the maintenance system was biased against men that struck me. He had similar views about social grants that he saw as undermining men’s role as ‘provider’. In one of our conversations Walter justified his evasion of his refusal to financially support both of his children on the grounds that social grants had come to substitute men’s role. He told me that the mothers of his children got ‘a lot of money’ from the government to look after his children. He did not seem troubled when I insisted that R380 (\$27) — the value of the child support grant (CSG) during my fieldwork — was barely enough to feed a child for a month. He instead

insisted that he would only support his children if the government stopped giving women grants. '[If the government] cancels this thing of giving them [women] money', referring to the CSG, 'we [men] will support our children', he blurted out. Our conversation that day got heated. I came away from it with the feeling that his contempt for social grants (much like the maintenance laws) had a lot in common with the resentment he felt towards Nombusa for walking out on him and taking him to court. It was Nombusa's assertion of her 'rights' that was the 'lightening rod' for tensions between Walter and his ex (Hunter 2010, 130).

One of the things that stood out to me in this conversation but also throughout my fieldwork was the way men would often blame women (rather than themselves) for the breakdown in relationships, infidelity, domestic violence, and fatherly absence. This appeared to stem from the resentment generated by women's increasing unwillingness to be acquiescent and submissive to men's pleas and demands. Walter often accused Nombusa of wanting to 'be the man of the house' and complained about her being 'rude' and having an 'attitude' that was, in his words, 'not ok'. 'She wanted to control me', he said, after telling me how she disliked his friends and discouraged him from going out at night. According to this logic it is women's failure to conform to 'traditional' gender roles that underpins men's failings to be present fathers and supportive partners.

Comments such as these reveal the fragility of the male ego but also, and perhaps, more urgently, the real difficulties some young men are having in finding more equitable ways of relating to women. The failure to do so has

serious consequences for men's relationships with their children. It is unlikely that Walter will have any substantive relationship with his child in the near future. When I asked him if he wants to see his daughter he told me that Nombusa's parents would not let him visit. 'I'll wait for her to come and find me when she is finished school', he said.

Breadwinner ideal: intact or not?

This chapter has so far sought to both complicate and qualify the pervasive view in South Africa that young men are failing to support their families, and meet their obligations to their children. Men's relationship with their children presents us with a much more messy and varied picture than that depicted by the so-called 'crisis of masculinity'. To make this point is not to overlook the fact that many young men are struggling to maintain longer-term relationships with women and only a minority of children grow up in the same household as their fathers. I have instead tried to show how men are responding to this situation, and to draw attention to the kinds of collaborations and conflicts that characterise men's attempts to maintain (or cut off) ties with their children.

I have shown that young men's responses are varied and are contingent upon the specific relationships and circumstances at hand. The majority of young men I got to know have not simply deserted their children nor do they provide their children (or their primary care-givers) with regular financial support. When this did occur the father was much more likely to be in regular wage employment and in a relationship with the mother – both of which are increasingly rare feats. It was much more common for men to

maintain their relations with their children through voluntary gifts and contributions. This is only partially explained by the fact that few young men have stable jobs or incomes. I have thus drawn attention to the competing demands on men's limited money but also what I see as a general reluctance on the part of young men to give money to women they are no longer in romantic or sexual relationships with.

This reluctance was especially acute after a bitter break-up and when the mothers' of my interlocutors' children were in a relationship with another man. I suggest this hesitance to offer financial support stems from the still prevailing idea that men's provision should not only involve the exchange of sexual and care attentions from women, but also women's submission to men's authority. Men's reluctance to give money to their children's mothers underpins some men's preference to support their children directly or through paying for their education (Hunter, 2015). Men's intimate relationships were often short-lived. This was not only the result of men's inability to offer reliable financial support. It was also frequently tied to women actively challenging the demands of patriarchy. The shifts in gender norms and expectations were especially apparent in a conversation I had with Joel (the 'hopeful jobseeker' in Chapter Four) about the rise in single parents.

H: Why do you think there are so many single mothers?

J: Men they love women, not woman, women. They know if there is an opportunity they will go. Most men honestly they are irresponsible. In the past, one man it was possible for him to marry 6 wives [...] Nowadays it's no longer possible

H: Why?

J: Culture is changing. Most women are educated now these days. They don't like to be ruled by an iron fist. They prefer to stay alone. Go out to have a baby and then stay alone.

H: Why is that?

J: Women are kind of challenging these days. Like, for example, a man will never date a successful woman [...] They know if you are independent, you have your own cash, they know you don't want to be controlled. If he goes and dates outside, you are going to just pack your things and go. If there is [a] woman with nothing she will never leave, where will she go? That's why I tell you, men are offended. They're not interested in working women. They scared of them.

H: What about you?

J: I'm not scared. I prefer those ones who are independent. That's why I said I'm going to get married when I'm [financially] independent. When I'm ready I'm going to marry someone who is responsible. [Someone] who has got everything.

The first thing that stood out to me was the connection Joel drew between the decline of marriage and young women's unwillingness to live under the authority of men. Joel not only emphasised women's preference to 'stay alone' but men's reluctance, although not his own, to be with these 'independent' or 'successful' women who transgress gender norms premised on the male 'provider'. A similar theme emerged in a discussion I had with a number of young women at the NGO office discussed in Chapter Three. A newspaper article that suggested close to sixty per cent of all children in South Africa are born out of wedlock animated our discussion. 'Why do you think the majority of children are born out of wedlock?', I asked the five women gathered. Mashudu, a 19 year old women who had finished school the year before, drew a link between the abuse and absence of her own father (and that of many other young women her age) and the undesirability of marriage amongst young women. She explained that

because many young people like her have grown up without a father they have come to question the necessity and desirability of having a man around.

Not all of the women present agreed with Mashudu. Some emphasised the importance of children getting to know their fathers. All of them, however, expressed doubts about the desirability of marriage for themselves. Refilwe (age 24, working part-time at a restaurant) entered the conversation by drawing a comparison between the present and the past. She noted that women and girls used to get married because they needed someone to 'take care of them' because it was 'declared their [women's] work should be in the kitchen'. 'The reason marriage is decreasing', she continued, 'is that women find themselves doing things they thought they would never do like working for themselves'. 'So', she continued, 'I don't need a man in my life. With or without a man I can live my life, the marriage thing is no longer important.' Refilwe also insisted that part of the reason women don't want to waste their time getting married is because men are 'proving themselves incompetent' especially when it comes to caring for their children.

There are significant transformations taking place in gender relations. It is clear that some young men not only begrudge women's independence that includes the increasing control they exert over their children's lives. These men view the erosion of male work and male-led householding as a threat to a masculine ideal. There are others who are responding in more creative ways that are giving rise to more egalitarian ways of relating to women and

new (albeit provisional) domestic orders in a ‘post-bargain’ era (Steinberg 2013).

There were signs of these new modes of relating and organising domestic life throughout my research. Perhaps the most important are new kinds of economic collaboration. The growing significance of social grants means that some forms of economic collaboration exclude young men. Nonetheless, there are examples of dual-income and co-habiting couples like Tshepo and Lerato who share the costs of raising their children. There were also instances where the woman in a partnership was the one in employment (at least for a period of time) and not the man. Mashudu, who I quoted earlier, admitted to me that while some men are intimidated by a women who has a job they are also ‘relieved’ because, as she put it, ‘it takes the pressure off’ men. In her mind, the ideal situation was when the man covered the ‘main expenses’ and the women’s income is ‘added on top’. The financial pressure on men to ‘provide’ – even when the costs of childcare were shared – was an on-going source of anxiety and conflict. Tshepo, for example, worried his girlfriend would leave him if he could not find a way to earn more money and ‘upgrade’ their living situation.

There was also evidence of men being more involved in the care of their children and in domestic duties. The latter was however fairly limited in scope. It was not uncommon to see young men spending time with their own young children or dropping or collecting them (or a sibling’s child) from pre-school. I got the sense that women (especially those with jobs) expect men to take on more household chores and care duties,

notwithstanding that women still did the overwhelming majority of domestic and care work. Xolani, who worked as a taxi driver and lived with his girlfriend, washed his girlfriend and his clothes in-between his morning and afternoon shift. One morning when I saw him bent over a large tub of dirty clothes I remarked teasingly that things were becoming ‘50’50’ (a term that has come to index the (still contentious) idea of gender equality).²⁶ Xolani looked up and told me that when ‘blacks’ see a man washing a women’s underwear they think that he is the woman. Men who do take on domestic chores or more care-work can be criticised for it. Tshepo, for example, told me that when some people see him with his son wrapped on his back, or feeding him with a bottle, they will call him ‘domesticated’. Tshepo’s view, however, was that assisting with care-work and domestic life was now essential if men wanted to ‘avoid problems’ in their relationships with women.

It is thus important to recognise that the conflicts, dilemmas and difficult trade-offs that characterise young men’s relationships with their intimate relations and obligations to their children cannot be reduced to men’s (in)ability to ‘provide’. They need to be seen in relation to wider social transformations taking place including the low marriage and co-habitation rates, the growing significance of social grants, and the increasing number of women entering the work force. Together these social changes are reconfiguring household dynamics and resource flows but also women’s

²⁶ ‘50/50’ was the title of a popular song by Mandoxa and Mdu with a chorus that went “Wonke umfazi oindependent, let’s go 50/50” (Every women who is independent, let’s go 50/50).

desire for relationships with men on more equal terms. I have shown that while some young men embrace these new gender norms and ideas and are trying to redefine their role in their partners and children's lives; others remain indignant and unwilling to accept their new position of subordination (Bozzoli 2015).

Conclusion

Most of the young men I spent time with draw a strong connection between manhood and their role as breadwinners. A man's capacity to be a good father or lover is still measured primarily by his ability to provide or take care of his family financially. The financial pressure this places on young men is a key source of anxiety and conflict. It also has direct implications for men's relationships with their children. In a context of declining and increasingly insecure work, it is not unthinkable to view the 'breadwinner ideal' as setting men up for failure. The central argument of this chapter has however been to problematize the dominant portrayal of men as 'stuck' or 'failing'. My research with young men in Zandspruit has helped me see the inadequacies of the picture presented by the literature on 'waithood' and a 'crisis of masculinity' (see Chapter One).

My aim in this discussion has been to show that the majority of young men I got to know are not trapped in a protracted state of non-adult nor have they completely abandoned their children. By foregrounding much wider social transformations including the decline of marriage and the increasing matrifocality of family relations in South Africa, I have attempted to show that something much more complex is happening in the constitution of

social ties and gender relations than is captured in the dominant narratives on 'youth' and 'masculinities' in Africa.

There is a tendency in this literature to assume that men not only feel emasculated when they fail to be breadwinners but also, somewhat simplistically, that all that stands in the way of them doing so is earning a stable wage. The focus of this chapter has instead been on how men negotiate the content and parameters of their social obligations, especially to their children, and what Seekings (2008) calls the 'practice and ethics of responsibility'. Such a view focuses on young men's exercise of choice while also allowing for a distinction to be made between what young men think they *ought* to do and what they actually do.

I hope to have demonstrated that young men are negotiating a world in which there is no precedent. They are making adult lives for themselves that are defined indefinitely by precarious earnings and fluid and shifting social relationships. The majority of young men negotiate their obligations to their children outside of marriage but very often also delinked from any romantic or sexual bond with the mother. While being married with an independent household might still exist as a distant horizon in young men's imaginations it is not how they are living in the here and now. Many have the feeling that the normative and moral frameworks they are operating within are relentlessly up for grabs. Young men's obligations to their children are not structured by a set of clear or consensual norms but are rather the site of intense disquiet, contestation and improvisation. The boundaries between right and wrong, proper and improper are not clear but rather blurred and

deeply contested. This chapter argues that young men are not entirely extricated from their social relations and ties (Ferguson 2015, 151) but are rather actively negotiating their social relationships according to long lasting ideals and new provisional norms.

Chapter 6

Making it or faking it: the politics of aspiration

Introduction

South Africa's transition to democracy had profound implications for the social imagination of black South Africans. The ANC's election promise of a 'better life for all' epitomised the way in which democracy enabled a re-imagining of the terms and conditions of citizenship and belonging. Freedom was imagined in terms of accelerated social mobility and acquisition of the very things apartheid had denied: houses, cars, cell phones and nice clothes (Posel 2010). The rise of a black middle class²⁷ in South Africa has bolstered the material aspirations of the majority of black South Africans. The contradiction is that while the democratic era has seen the standard of living increase for a small black elite and growing black middle class, the majority of black South Africans are poor, jobless, and with limited, if any, prospects

²⁷There has been a tendency in much of the South African literature to present the black middle class in South Africa as an entirely 'new' or post-apartheid phenomenon. It is important to stress that while the black middle class has grown over the past two decades it is not entirely new and that in many instances the black middle class of today are the beneficiaries of longer processes of social mobility (Khunou 2015; Mabandla 2015). The growing body of research on the rise of a middle class in Africa (Melber 2016; Scharrer, O'Kane, and Kroecker 2018) and South Africa (Alexander et al. 2013; Krige 2015; Southall 2016) has also highlighted the difficulties of defining and determining who constitutes the middle class. The challenge is to a large extent the consequence of competing theoretical approaches to studying class. See Southall (2016, 1–23) for a good summary of the two main approaches stemming from the work of Max Weber and Karl Marx. Seekings (2009) has argued that a neo-Marxist approach has been more or less dominant in the South African scholarship since the 1970s. This contrasts with a number of earlier studies on social stratification during apartheid (Kuper 1965; M. Wilson and Mafeje 1963).

of social mobility. South Africa is thus a place where the black majority catch ‘glimpses of vast wealth’ while feeling the ‘dawning sense of chill desperation attendant on being left out of the promise of prosperity, of the telos of liberation’ (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 284).

The contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa are shared by many post-colonial and post-revolutionary contexts across the continent (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Mbembe 2001; Newell 2012; Piot 2010; Weiss 2004). The processes of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism ushered in new modes of aspiration and consumption alongside ever-growing unemployment and escalating disparities in wealth. The disjuncture between the expectations of material success and the reality of continued socio-economic exclusion is as much a structural condition of global capitalism as it is an everyday experience in most African countries (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Goldstone and Obarrio 2017). It is precisely this disjuncture between aspirations and reality that anthropologists have identified as a situation confronting youth across the continent (Archambault 2013; Hansen 2005; Mains 2012; Masquelier 2013; Newell 2012; Vigh 2006). A key theme in this body of work is the experience young people have of feeling trapped in a continuous present due to their inability to attain desirable social goals; a condition some suggest is synonymous to ‘waiting’ (Cole and Durham 2008; Hansen 2005; Honwana 2012).

Another key theme in this body of work – that has also shaped my own thinking – is the growing significance of consumption to young people’s identities, aspirations and understandings of citizenship (Archambault 2013;

Newell 2012; Weiss 2004). Especially relevant for my purposes here is Sasha Newell's (2012) study on Ivorian youth's displays of conspicuous consumption and to a lesser extent Brad Weiss's (2002, 2004) study of barbershops in urban Tanzania. Both of these studies demonstrate the interplay of the imagination and social practice – in the barbershops in Arusha and the outdoor bars in Abidjan – where the local, global and imagined converge. As the Comaroffs point out, an increasingly close relationship between 'self-realisation' and consumption must be seen in relation to the changing status of work under late capitalism (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 2002, 783). It is not only that there has been an erosion of value in labour in a context of 'surplus populations' but also that consumption has to a significant extent replaced production as the site of desire and investment (Baudrillard 1998; Miller 1994, 1995). It is important to recognise that in many post-colonial contexts, and perhaps especially in South Africa, consumption practices are never only an index of individual accomplishment and prestige but also of racial emancipation and 'freedom' (Posel 2010).²⁸

²⁸ Sarah Nuttall has suggested that the consumption practices of a new young black middle class is an attempt to 'soften race and class difference by invoking the powerful notion of style' (Nuttall 2008, 111). Chipkin (2012), in stark contrast to Nuttall, argues that the racial identities of a young black middle class are not weakening. In his analysis of middle 'classing' in the townhouse complexes of urban Johannesburg, he argues that in multi-racial residential spaces the black middle class are still strongly attached to their racial identities 'yet they are changing the landscape of metaphors, values and practices to which they are being directed' (2012, 73). It is also vital to stress that a rich body of scholarship on social differentiation among urban Africans during apartheid points to the long-standing importance of consumption in class differentiation. See for example: Archie Mafeje and Monica Wilson's (1963) study in Langa (Cape Town); Leo Kuper's (1965) study in Durban; and Mia Brandel-Syrier's (1971) study in the pseudonymous 'Reeftown' on the East Rand.

I begin this chapter with a portrait of Motswako Pot – a popular buy and braai restaurant in the heart of Zandspruit – that has established itself as a popular hangout for members of a growing black middle class who live in the surrounding areas.²⁹ It is at Motswako where my interlocutors come face to face with the contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa, and the widening discrepancies in black wealth. Much like the outdoor bars Newell (2012) describes in Abidjan, the consumption of copious amounts of alcohol and meat at Motswako, along with the display of people's expensive cars, is critical to the performance of economic success. Motswako offers us a unique vantage point to examine how young men experience and respond to the inequalities around them and thus assess their current position in society and chances of getting ahead.

In presenting Motswako as a site of aspirational consumption I hope to illustrate the ways in which my interlocutors' aspirations are never simply representations but are grounded in reality and form an important part of their social lives (Appadurai, 1991, 198; Weiss, 2002, 2004). Young men's imaginations and ideas of success are not only grounded in specific local contexts but also in larger social, economic, political and symbolic

²⁹ The northwest corner of Johannesburg is home to a multitude of townhouse complexes, luxury golf estates, and gated communities. While the residents of the luxury golf estates and gated communities remain overwhelmingly white (Duca 2015), the construction of Cosmo City (the government's first mixed-income mega-housing project discussed Chapter Two) and tens of thousands of 'affordable' townhouse units has made entering the middle class for young black South Africans much more accessible (Chipkin 2012). The growth of a black middle class in the northwest region of Johannesburg has changed the race and class composition of the area while also making discrepancies in (black) wealth and income more proximate.

relationships and configurations. In foregrounding the local context my goal is not to negate the structural underpinnings of the extreme disparities in wealth and income in South Africa but rather to draw attention, as Palomera and Vetta (2016, 414) note, to the ways in which structural inequalities are ‘always metabolized through particular fields constituted by dynamic combinations of norms, meanings, and practices.’ I therefore present Motswako as a site where the actual, possible and fantastic intersect as a ‘social field’ of action and critical reflection.

I spent a significant amount of time at Motswako over the course of my fieldwork. It provided one of the few quiet spaces – during the week at least – to conduct interviews with the added draw of an ice-cold coke or beer. My trips to Motswako over the weekend were quite different and usually at the invitation of someone else. I spent even more time hanging out at Khenzo and Oscar’s car wash stand (see Chapter Three) that was enveloped into these wider displays of wealth over the weekend. The displays of wealth in and around Motswako generated a great deal of friction, suspicion and moral debate. Accounts of money spent, clothes worn, cars parked – all reflections of people’s personal successes or failures – circulated in many of my conversations with young people.

Does the proximity of black wealth inspire hope or lead to despair? This is one of the key questions this chapter addresses. It was precisely this question Albert Hirschman grappled with in his 1973 essay entitled: ‘Changing tolerance for income inequality’ (Hirschman and Rothschild 1973). Hirschman argued that in post-revolutionary societies new and growing

inequality could paradoxically instil hope because those left behind watch the mobility of others in anticipation of their own futures. Hirschman emphasised that this initial period of optimism is short-lived. If disparities in wealth do not narrow – or social mobility is viewed as improbable – people will eventually lose their earlier hope and find ways to express their frustration.

In this chapter I argue that young men in Zandspruit view the trappings of black wealth in their midst and dismiss them as ‘fake’. Why so? Mostly because they do not think that black people like them can really make it, and that those who look like they are making it are pretending. By documenting the discourses and rumours of falsity generated by the display of wealth at Motswako, I argue that young men are neither optimistic nor despairing about their futures. Instead, I contend that young men approach their lives with a pragmatic realism that is at once an attempt to reckon with their structural exclusion and a resolve to not give up on their dreams.

Motswako: a space of aspirational consumption

Motswako has established itself as a sought-after restaurant for the upwardly mobile in the north of Johannesburg. It is one of the few spaces where the worlds of the affluent and less affluent collide. The middle classes come to Motswako to socialise, enjoy the atmosphere, and, of course, the grilled meat and *chakalaka* (a spicy tomato relish) for which Motswako is famous.

The owner, Philemon Molokana³⁰, opened Motswako in 2008. The restaurant operates out of a converted RDP house – opposite the taxi rank – in the more suburban section of the settlement. On Saturdays and Sundays the restaurant is packed. People spill into the streets lined with BMWs, Volkswagen Golf GTis, and Mercedes Benzs. Popular House and Rhythm and Blues (R&B) music blares into the airways. Groups of friends can be found gathered around car boots and cooler boxes filled with booze. Motswako opens into the street on both sides making it perhaps the most public of spaces in Zandspruit – a stage for the display of wealth and social status.

Mandla, who grew up in Zandspruit, described the arrival of Motswako like this: ‘I don’t drive a car in Zandspruit’, he said, ‘I live in Zandspruit’. ‘That’s all you’ve known your whole life and then all of a sudden there is this nice place which is Motswako with a lot of things that you never thought you’d get close to’. Young people in Zandspruit often referred to Motswako as the ‘expensive place’ to drink and contrasted it with the majority of ‘cheap’ drinking spots in the settlement. Compared to the small (often one-room) *shebeens* and taverns in most neighbourhoods, where people either stand or sit on upturned beer crates, Motswako is noticeably upmarket. It has large wooden tables covered in plastic tablecloths and branded umbrellas outside. It also sells more expensive brands of alcohol that are a prominent marker of social class in the community.

³⁰ This is a pseudonym.

The consumption of alcohol has long been an essential part of men's practices of sociability (Karp 1987; Mager 2010) and a powerful signifier of class (Krige 2010). As Detlev Krige notes in his study of beer consumption practices in Soweto (2010, 234–35), drinking remains an integral part of distinguishing oneself from others. Beers that are produced abroad like Amstel and Windhoek are more expensive and carry more status than locally produced beers such as Hansa and Black Label. Motswako also sells light beers and ciders (such as Savanna Dry and Redds). These are especially popular with younger women and much harder to find in a tavern. The type of bottle is also an important marker of status. In most taverns beer is sold in quarts (750ml bottles) that are usually shared and passed around a group of friends. Motswako only sells beers in smaller (330ml) bottles making it more costly. Drinking at Motswako is a clear index of one's social status. 'If you are consistently drinking [at Motswako]', one of my interlocutors told me, 'it means you are *affording* [a term commonly used to index a person of a higher economic status, emphasis added].

Motswako's reputation as the 'classy place' to drink has a great deal to do with its ability to attract the upwardly mobile who live in the surrounding area and drive expensive cars. Cars have particular significance in the post-liberation imaginary. During apartheid, black people's lives were confined to the township and their mobility often limited to walking. This is especially significant in Johannesburg where social mobility is closely associated with 'auto-mobility' (Livermon 2008, 274). A car is thus more than a symbol of wealth; it is also a form of freedom and resistance to spatial

dislocation, racial polarisation, and class differentiation. The presence of the black middle class and their accompanying cars contributes to the discursive framing of Motswako as a space of aspirational (and thus differential) consumption.



Figure 9: Cars parked outside Motswako

The presence of the upwardly mobile at Motswako nurtures local youth's dreams of one day joining the middle class while at the same time exacerbating their sense of exclusion and fears of being left behind. Many of the young men I spent time with appreciated that Motswako brought people who might otherwise not set foot into Zandspruit into the area. This was seen to contest the reification of Zandspruit as an undifferentiated place of deprivation and its residents as equally poor and disenfranchised. One young man by the name of Prince described Motswako to me as a 'place that

integrates people [from Zandspruit]' with those who 'have done well for themselves'. He noted that spending time at Motswako with people who own BMWs made you feel as if you are 'in the same [social] class with them'. As Prince makes clear, local youth valued the opportunity provided by Motswako for them to participate in the kinds of leisure and consumption practices (albeit partially and momentarily) that have become increasingly important markers of social status in post-apartheid South Africa.

It is worth saying a little more about Motswako's clientele. While the majority of local taverns and *shebeens* have an extremely local clientele, often from the same neighbourhood or street, Motswako draws patrons from different geographies and class backgrounds. This includes people coming from Soweto, Midrand, Fourways, and, perhaps most notably, Cosmo City. It is important to stress, however, that local residents of varying affluence *do* socialise at (and within the vicinity of) Motswako. The number of local residents at the restaurant spiked at the end of the month in celebration of payday. Most of the young men I got to know could not afford to go to Motswako with any regularity. Their trips were sporadic and contingent upon their access to money. Some local youth told me they preferred to stay away from Motswako for fear of being seen there without a drink in their hand. Others, however, reserved funds especially for their trips to Motswako. Being seen to spend money on alcohol and meat at Motswako is one of the most effectual ways for local youth to demonstrate their financial success. It also allowed local youth to project an image as someone whose life was, as one young man put it, 'going somewhere'. The consumption practices (or lack thereof) of people at Motswako were also a source of entertainment for a wider public and the fodder for much local gossip. The

young men who spent time socialising and drinking around Khenzo and Oscar's car wash stand rarely stepped inside Motswako. They did, however, subject those who did spend their time and money there to a great deal of scrutiny, often accusing them of 'showing off' and spending their money irresponsibly.

Many of my interlocutors who viewed Motswako as a site of integration and aspiration were also critical of the relatively wealthy (including a local elite) who come to Zandspruit to 'show off'. Local youth resent them for rubbing their superior status in the face of poorer black South Africans. This turned some, though not all, young men's admiration into hostility. Joel, for example, highlighted his hostility when he told me that the relatively wealthy come and park their BMWs in Zandspruit to 'feel more powerful' because they know most people in Zandspruit 'walk each day'. The criticisms of local youth went beyond a concern about the display of wealth amongst poverty. Motswako was often spoken about as a proxy for a wider consumer impulse and all its associated moral hazards, social pressures, and anxieties. I came to see that while consumption is desired – and enmeshed in young men's ideas and imaginations of upward mobility – its place in a context of growing unemployment and inequality is deeply contested.

I want to stress an important difference between Newell's work and my analysis here. In Newell's account, his interlocutors are the primary contestants in the displays of excessive consumption that he shows to be an essential part of young men's strategy to get by in the city. We know very little in his account about what Ivorian youth who are *not* bluffers, or for

that matter the parents, siblings, or lovers of the bluffers, think of these displays of wealth. My point is that by examining the efficacy of ‘the bluff’ Newell overlooks the social function of the suspicions and rumours of falsity. He also ignores the views of those doing the accusing (as opposed to those being accused) that are equally worthy of analysis – not least because they throw light on the lived experiences of inequality, insecurity and precarity.

My interlocutors, bar the odd exception, are best conceived as observers of the kinds of consumption spectacles at Motswako and only rarely, if at all, participants. This is not to say my interlocutors did not participate in the symbolic economy that links consumerism to social status nor do I disagree with Newell’s larger point that the image of success has in many ways become increasingly hard to distinguish from success itself. It was precisely the propensity to which signs of real wealth could replace the real that generates profound moral and temporal anxiety for the young men I got to know. While Newell highlights the productiveness of the increased blurring between the fake and the real for his young men, my interlocutors sought to draw attention to the illegitimacy or inauthenticity of those who ‘bluff’. I will discuss the significance of this in the final two sections. For now I want to stress that, unlike Newell’s youth, the quest for appearing wealthy has *not* overridden the quest for being wealthy. In fact, it was precisely the propensity for the fabrication of wealth that evoked profound suspicion and anxiety.

The rest of this chapter is split into two sections. The first examines young men's own narratives of success, hopes for the future and attitudes towards material progress. I show that my interlocutors' aspirations are closely aligned with what they see as the lifestyle of the middle class and are thus orientated towards an increased capacity for consumption rather than to production. Ultimately, this section argues that the inequalities that pervade South Africa are internalised as a form of fantasy. In the second section I discuss the moral contestations, dilemmas and tensions that accompany young men's aspirations and ideas of social mobility. I do this by analysing the discourses of falsity that are generated by the displays of wealth at Motswako. I show that young men's concern with the counterfeit is not only a reflection of the contradictions and disjunctures in young men's own lives but also widespread feelings of insecurity, grievance and disenchantment with democracy and its promise. More broadly, this chapter sheds light on the wider moral economy young men in this study inhabit.

'I want to upgrade': The fantasy of a middle class life

Young men's aspirations are driven by ambitious social comparisons. My interlocutors often compared themselves with the more affluent who visit Motswako, along with the lives of the middle classes in Cosmo City and the surrounding suburbs. These young men spoke explicitly about wanting to change 'the status' of their lives and fantasised about moving to the suburbs (a move that has long signalled transition into the middle class). When I asked Tshepo, who we met in the previous chapter, about his ambitions for the future he told me that he wanted to 'move out of this place [Zandspruit]'. 'I don't want to be here', he told me. 'I don't want to end up living this life in the coming years. I want to upgrade'. Another interlocutor,

Tebogo, answered my questions about his hopes for the future as follows: 'There is no life here in Zandspruit', he said, recounting instances of being woken up by gunshots and his neighbours fighting. 'What do you call this?', he said. 'It's not life. You [are] not free'. 'Once I make money', he continued, 'I [will] leave'. Young men living in Zandspruit locate their interactions with the more affluent (in person and spatial proximity) as moments in which to imagine the life that they want.

My interlocutors often framed their aspirations around a movement out of Zandspruit to something better. The desire to move out of Zandspruit and into a 'proper' house is integrally connected to young men's everyday experience of poverty and deprivation. As Weiss (2002, 2004) points out, marginality and exclusion are not contrary to the fantastic but rather a necessary component for the fantastic to exist. My interlocutor's narratives of progress and success frequently drew attention to the difficulties and uncertainties of living in a shack without proper sanitation or adequate privacy. Some men's aspirations were driven by the daily threat of crime and violence and their wish for their children to grow up in a different environment. Still others stressed the fact that most people in Zandspruit lack proper legal tenure for their shacks (or the land they live on) making it too risky to invest in erecting a proper structure.

'[This is] not a place to raise children', Palesa, a 25 year old woman with one young child, told me, as I sat on a couch in her three-roomed shack. She continued, listing a barrage of factors that make life unbearable here – such as the stinking water running down the roads, destroyed property when it

rains, and increased risk of illness. Palesa concluded her impassioned rant like this: 'It would be better if they [the government] would give us streets and mark off yards, then we would build our own houses. But now anytime, any day, they can tell us to fuck off'. 'This is not living', she avowed, 'No one wants to live in a shack their whole lives'. The everyday realities of living in a shack without proper sanitation, a lack of privacy, the perpetual risk of crime and violence, epitomised young people's sense of social exclusion and immobility. It is this experience of being excluded that gives people's fantasies of leaving Zandspruit and entering the middle class their social force. Equally important is Weiss's (2002, 2004) observation that being able to participate in one's fantasy intermittently, and often only incompletely or indirectly through the stories of others who have 'made it', is what allows the 'total fantasy' of the middle class suburban life to have its alluring appeal.

While most young people made the connection between social mobility and moving out of Zandspruit and into a brick and mortar house, the urgency given to leaving was not evenly distributed amongst my interlocutors. The variance had a great deal to do with the section of the settlement (see Chapter Two) someone lived in. Those living in shack-dwellings in the most congested and under-serviced parts of the settlement saw moving out of Zandspruit (even into a back-room in Cosmo City) as a precondition to improving their lives. Those who lived in the more suburban sections of Zandspruit, and perhaps especially those who live in an RDP or concrete house, while still fantasising about moving to the suburbs, were also making investments in their properties to cement their place and economic interests in the settlement. My interlocutors in the latter category were notably few.

The distinction is still a useful one because while everyone I met agreed that Zandspruit was ‘not a place for the future’, people’s relationship to Zandspruit, and beliefs about its role in propelling them forward or backwards, differed – sometimes quite dramatically.

‘I don’t want to be rich, I just want to afford’

Young men’s wish to leave Zandspruit was not simply about greater material comfort. It was closely associated with a yearning for economic stability and mobility. The young men I interviewed expressed strongly that they do not want to ‘just survive’ but instead want to ‘be successful’, ‘live comfortably’, or, as Sizwe put it, ‘live a nice life’. The clearest expression of this came from Thatho, who made his money wiring electricity connections (see Chapter Four). When I asked him what he wanted for his future, he responded as follows: ‘I just want to get out of Zandspruit’, he told me. ‘I want to buy myself a house maybe at Randpark [a suburb in the North of Johannesburg]. I just want to be successful, that’s all.’ When I asked Thatho what he meant by successful he responded:

Owning my own house. Having my cars. Just living a normal life instead of living in a shack where you don’t have to worry when it’s raining. Just living a normal life where I can afford nearly anything I want [emphasis added].

Thatho’s idea of ‘the good life’ (Fischer 2014) involved acquiring a house and a car but also a capacity for greater consumption and choice – what he described as an ability to ‘afford’ the things he wants. The word ‘afford’ was one I heard throughout my fieldwork. Young men often described their lives in terms of their inability ‘to afford’ when compared with the upwardly mobile, for example those they see spending large sums of money at

Motswako. It thus reflected a yearning to exercise greater choice through spending. The word ‘afford’ was also used to index a positive aspiration to get ahead and transcend a life marked by material scarcity and constant hustling. The aspiration ‘to afford’ rarely invoked a specific occupation or job but rather a desire for more money and what it could enable.

The word ‘afford’ was also used by local youth to distinguish between people of higher and lower social classes. My interlocutors used the idea of afford in ways that were nearly identical to the Soweto residents in Alexander et al’s (2013) study *Class in Soweto*. For instance, when I asked Setsumi what distinguished a person who was middle class he told me that they ‘can afford things that other people cannot afford’ that will allow them to ‘take a step forward’. Asked the same question, another interlocutor told me: ‘[As a middle class person] you have got your own house, your own car, and you are affording expensive things’. In the Soweto study, the ‘middle class’ – or rather those said to be ‘in the middle’ – were distinguished from those who are ‘suffering’ (the lower class or poor) and those who can ‘afford everything’ (the upper class or rich) (Alexander et al. 2013, 28–29). Alexander et al’s (2013) observation in Soweto that a person’s capacity to ‘afford’ is read off their body or lifestyle holds equally well in Zandspruit. Prince, who described Motswako to me as a place that allows local residents to mingle with those who are better off, explained that when people see you at Motswako they ‘*think* [you] can afford those things, like [the] middle class [emphasis added]’. Prince’s comment captures the ambiguities that surround the increasingly close links between social standing and consumption and a widespread concern with the blurring of the lines between the real and the fake.

When one of my interlocutors told me that he did not want to ‘be rich’ but instead wanted ‘to afford’ he was not only declaring a desire for money and what it can buy (a house or car) but rather a longing for a wholly different life(style). The aspiration to ‘afford’ was closely tied to a common assertion amongst my interlocutor’s that they wanted to ‘live’ (or ‘enjoy’) and not simply ‘survive’. Interestingly, the young people Julie Archambault writes about in Inhambane, Mozambique make a very similar distinction between ‘living’ and ‘merely surviving’ (2013, 89.98, 2015, 129). A person who is ‘surviving’, for example, is someone in a precarious economic situation who is unable to get a break from the daily grind of getting-by. A person who is ‘living’ or ‘enjoying’, on the other hand, is someone in a more secure economic position who is not consumed by everyday survivalism. Such a person was seen to be someone who participates in various consumption and leisure activities and, equally important, someone who can project themselves into the ‘near future’. I asked one of my interlocutors, Prince, what defines a person who is ‘enjoying’ after he juxtaposed his life as one of incessant improvisation or ‘making-do’ with such a person. ‘People who are enjoying are people who have cars [and] have everything they need on their *own time* [emphasis added]’, Prince told me. ‘For example’, he continued, ‘if I go to the bank and money comes out and I go to Durban [coastal city] to just enjoy [...] [or] to places like Motswako eating [and] drinking beer’.

Prince’s comments allow us to appreciate that the aspiration to ‘afford’ or ‘live’ is not only about material advancement – or about the kinds of things that have historically only been accessible to white people. It is also very

closely tied to a desire to step aside from the endless hustle of ‘making do’ and what a number of scholars have recognised as a condition of permanent ‘temporariness’ (Goldstone and Obarrio 2017, 14; Guyer 2007; Mbembe 2017, 223). With these considerations in mind we can perhaps better grasp what Prince means when he describes a person who is ‘living’ as someone who can do things in their ‘own time’. This is a person who is imagined to be the master of his or her own life and thus able to carve out a meaningful future for his or herself in the medium to long term. It is worth emphasising that when young people talk about their ideas of success or a ‘good life’ they talk about a cessation from hustling that thwarts their ability to plan for the future and anticipate a better life. The ‘good life’ is imagined less in terms of one’s (economic) productivity or position in the production process and more in terms of an increased capacity for leisure and consumption.

The close links between young men’s imagination of ‘the good life’ and a desire to escape a perpetual ‘presentism’ (Guyer 2007), on the one hand, and an increased capacity for leisure, on the other, became especially clear to me in a conversation with Walter about his future ambitions. Walter made a significant sum of money through the rental market in Zandspruit. He had plans to expand his property portfolio to include more backrooms in Zandspruit and, at a later stage, RDP houses in Cosmo City. In one of our discussions, Walter characterised his present life as one involving a persistent ‘hunt’ for money and compared this with an imagined future of leisure. His ultimate aim was to save enough money to buy (or build his own) home in a townhouse complex and retire at age 45. ‘By 45 you must stay at home. You [must] eat your money and relax’, he told me. And, he continued, ‘you must have a big plasma [television] [and] a nice couch,

[Then I can say] I'm enjoying myself". Walter depicted himself as someone with a long-term vision of what he 'wants in life'. He frequently contrasted this self-image with a picture of other young men (his age and younger) who spend their money on booze and expensive clothes 'to impress' others instead of focusing on 'where they're going'.

Walter makes clear that social mobility is closely associated with leisure and consumption. He also highlights a distinction in the ways money is acquired and spent and the different aspirations and moral values this indexes – for example, aimless versus goal-directed, irresponsible versus forward-thinking. The moral values are premised on a stark binary between short-term consumption (i.e. alcohol and clothes) and what are perceived to be more durable forms of consumption (i.e. buying a house or money spent on education). In speaking at great length about his immediate as well as his medium and long-term goals and plans, Walter sought to distinguish himself from other youth. He associated the consumerist desire of other youth (but not his own) with an abandonment of longer-term planning. The young people I got to know feel they are scrutinised for the ways in which they spend their limited money. The contradictory moral values surrounding consumption leave many youth in a dilemma. Buying expensive drinks at Motswako (or wearing expensive clothes) holds the possibility of increasing young men's social status while at the same time making them vulnerable to accusations of being preoccupied with 'enjoying' oneself in the present and failing to invest in the future. Walter's comment reflects a widespread stereotype in the media and government rhetoric that links young people's desire to consume to a misguided prioritisation of the present over the

future. This moral judgement was especially palpable at a youth rally I attended in June 2015.

The City of Johannesburg had partnered with a local youth-run NGO to host what was advertised as a 'career exhibition'. The organisers promised a line-up of speakers including representatives from various technical colleges, universities, the department of labour, the youth desk at the local police station, and the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA). The NYDA was set up in 2008 to address youth development issues at national, provincial and local government level. I arrived late and found a seat in the back row of chairs in the school driveway. A woman from the NYDA stood up to speak as soon as I arrived. 'Do you want to see yourself somewhere someday – to move from here to Sandton or Honeydew?', she asked, before admonishing youth for the next ten minutes for not prioritising their education or making use of government initiatives to help youth start their own businesses. In her attempt to encourage young people to become entrepreneurs and thus take charge of their futures, what she implied was that the young (and largely poor and unemployed) people gathered there were themselves to blame for the lack of progress in their lives, rather than the wider social structures, not least the low quality school education most of them received.

The next speaker was a police officer that was in charge of the 'youth desk' at the local police station. He was short, well built, and wore a tight fitted black golf-shirt. The youth desk is a volunteer based structure at the police station that, at least in theory, aims to involve young people in curbing

crime in the community. ‘Do you want to see yourself in a squatter camp for the rest of your life?, he asked, as he got up on the stage. His pep talk was also more rebuke than motivation. Young people are ‘killing their futures’, he said, criticising young people for being more interested in obtaining Carvela shoes (a high-end Italian brand) worth R3000 (\$215) than in going to school. The officer then made the following statement: ‘Either you suffer now and *enjoy* the rest of your life or you *enjoy* now and suffer the rest of your life [emphasis added]’. The police officer affirmed the aspiration for social mobility at the same time as condemning young people for their impatience and unwillingness to work hard to obtain their dreams.

The lived experience of many of those gathered was enough proof that hard work had very little to do with who got ahead. Getting ahead was seen to have as much to do with luck and having ‘connections’ as it was with merit or individual effort. Moreover, unlike Walter who had a very clear vision of how he would make money, most of my interlocutors had less clarity on the best pathway to pursue in the medium term to get-ahead. They were not engulfed by the presentism of daily survival but rather engaged in a multitude of activities and attempts to improve their lives. This finding requires qualification. Young men’s continuous strategizing to make money and get ahead co-existed with a sense that these very attempts offered little hope of escaping a condition of precariousness. A number of my interlocutors admitted that a person who escapes Zandspruit is ‘very lucky’. A comment by Senzo captured the sense of puzzlement and uncertainty that characterised many young men’s attempts to improve their lives. When I asked Senzo about his longer-term ambitions he responded by describing himself as being ‘in a blind spot’ and being unable to ‘see the route’ that

would take him somewhere. It is a fitting metaphor for the experience of many youth in Zandspruit who experience their futures as being disguised or out of view. Senzo was not alone in feeling he lacked a clear sense of direction. Kabelo who worked on and off for a local NGO told me in one of our conversations that he did not know where his ‘fate’ was taking him. At the time he hoped the NGO he worked for episodically might offer him a full-time job while also emphasising his unwillingness to ‘stick around’ if they did not increase his pay. ‘I feel like I can’t push [or] shove’, he told me. ‘I must just assist slowly [...] but at the same time I can’t be too relaxed’.

What the police officer at the youth rally failed to recognise was that wearing expensive clothes – or spending money on alcohol at Motswako – was one of the only means for local youth to acquire status in ways that are by their nature ephemeral. This became especially clear to me during a conversation with Mashudu who volunteered at the youth NGO where I spent time. We were sitting on the couch at the back of the office. Mashudu had a great sense of style and took much pride in looking ‘top-class’ without spending money on expensive brands. After a lull in the conversation I asked Mashudu her views on the youth sub-culture *I’khotane* that had been the subject of much debate in the office a few days before. *I’khotane* is primarily known for its performances of ‘destructive consumption’ that involve poor, predominantly male, township youth burning designer clothes and shoes worth thousands of rands (M.Jones, 2013). These performances are paradoxical in that they raise the status of those engaged in them while also critiquing the culture of consumption that surrounds them (Vincent and Howell 2014; M. Jones 2013). Mashudu linked the aspiration to consume to the desire to ‘escape poverty’. She summed it up like this: ‘I think everyone

wants to look good. Everyone wants to own that thing. We all want to fit in. That's because we are so ashamed of being poor'. Later in our discussion Mashudu explained that when she goes to a nearby shopping mall on the weekend people do not think she is 'struggling'. She admitted to trying on designer clothes she could not afford and taking selfies she posts on social media. Her point was that at the shopping mall no one could tell if she lived in a shack or not, and this, she insisted, offered her the possibility to pull off the appearance of success.

An overemphasis on young men's aspiration to consume runs the risk of suggesting young men conceived of 'the good life' primarily in material terms. I therefore want to stress that young men saw taking care of their families and children as a key component of a 'good life'. A number of my interlocutors who had children spoke about wanting to have the resources to send their children to better schools or to university. Others wanted to help build a house for their mothers to retire to. Prince, who worked for a local NGO, told me that his dream was to have sufficient 'money in the bank' to be able to buy a house and car and ensure his children would be provided for should he pass away. In a similar vein, Sibongile's notion of success was closely tied to supporting his family. 'You know I'm from a background that is poor', he said, 'so I need to assist my parents [...] and even my kids'. He continued: '[my mom] never lived in a brick house since she was born. So I want to buy her a house and furniture inside. My dad has a house by Pretoria so the one thing I can do for my Dad is buy him a *bakkie* or something and assist my little brothers with education'.

The aspiration to ‘afford’ and ‘live’ must therefore also be viewed in relation to youths desire not only to improve their own lives but also their families. The aspiration to build a house for a parent or offer financial support to enable a child, sibling, or cousin to attend a private school or university is an integral part of youths yearning for a sense of biographic progression. It is also tied to the desire to make one’s life count for something bigger than oneself. In my earlier research (Dawson 2014a), I noted the ‘generational burden’ many young people feel to improve the lives of their parents, siblings, and wider family relations. The drawback of improvised livelihoods is their unpredictability; making it difficult to transform one’s longer-term plans into reality (Archambault 2015). What is often overlooked is that this irregularity can also be advantageous when those with a wage bear the brunt of the economic burdens and liabilities of their families.

One of the most important themes that emerged in discussions about young people’s aspirations was the tension they saw between individual advancement and social responsibilities. This tension is exacerbated by the growing importance of consumption to self-worth and the reality of ever-growing joblessness and inequality. The tension between self-advancement and social obligations was often felt most acutely by those in employment or with a more regular source of income. Having a job not only came with an expectation to support one’s family. It also involved the pressure to ‘show you are working’ that involved acquiring status symbols that earmarked you as a person who was on their way to a better life. As noted earlier, while wearing expensive clothes, owning a car, or being seen to drink expensive brands of alcohol might increase one’s social status it also made one

vulnerable to accusations of absconding social obligations and thus prioritising oneself over others. The consequence is that young men have to tread a fine line between displaying and performing a certain consumerist identity whilst downplaying its importance at the same time.

Many of the young men I spent time with were keenly aware of the moralising rhetoric I heard at the youth rally and the stark inequalities that surround them. This cognisance was apparent in the way some young men downplayed their material aspirations. Kabelo, for example, spoke about wanting to have ‘just enough’ money but not ‘too much’ to be able to send his sister’s children to university and, as he put it, ‘start my own family in time’. Other interlocutors of mine made similar remarks in our conversations about their hopes for the future. Young men told me they did not want to be ‘rich’ but simply ‘to afford’. Likewise, Thatho, who I quoted earlier, told me he wanted to ‘just live a normal life’. In voicing their aspirations in this way my interlocutors reflect the hope, or at least the possibility, that their (individual) fates might change while at the same time recognising the dwindling odds of this possibility. Nonetheless, such comments indicate that ‘just having enough’ would in fact already be a step up. At the same time, Thatho’s framing of his aspirations as ‘normal’ might also be viewed as an insistence that the content of his dreams are reasonable rather than excessive and therefore morally and politically defensible.

‘Living a false dream’: challenging authenticity and contesting aspirations

We have already seen that a focus on consumption brings the paradoxes, contradictions and quandaries of post-apartheid life into sharp focus. It also illustrates the ways in which the divides between inclusion and exclusion have become increasingly blurred, uncertain and contested. Consumption is a constitutive element of how young people understand accomplishment, liberation, and belonging as well as a harbinger for wider misgivings about widening inequalities. In this section I examine the widespread suspicions about the legitimacy and authenticity of black wealth and consumption. These suspicions are indicative of the pervasive anxieties and worries young men have about their futures and the prospects for social mobility at large. I do this through an analysis of the discourses of falsity that are generated by the displays of wealth at Motswako. I show that the concern with ‘faking it’, as my interlocutors put it, not only reflects the contradictions and disjunctures in their lives but also indexes a much more profound disquiet with democracy itself.

Motswako is a space of contradiction where democracy’s promise of a ‘better life’ is at once close at hand and perpetually out-of-reach. It is this contradiction that generates friction and suspicions as well as self-reflexivity and social critique. It was not only the patrons of Motswako that aroused suspicion but the restaurant itself. In fact the restaurant’s success has made it – and its owner – the subject of precisely the kinds of moral evaluation and critique I want to draw attention to.

The suspicion surrounding the success of Motswako, and its owner Philemon Molokana, has its roots in his acquisition of a government-subsidised RDP house. Molokana claims he bought the RDP house from his aunt who was an official beneficiary of the government's housing programme in Zandspruit. Many local residents dispute this and label his story a sham. Some claim his 'aunt' did not even live in the community while others insist she was not on the 1996-housing registry and thus not a legitimate beneficiary.³¹ In several instances my interlocutors noted that Molokana was 'getting rich' from a house that should have been given to a 'needy' citizen. It was not only Molokana's acquisition of an RDP house that stirred derision amongst local residents. It was that he was seen to be getting rich, if not at the expense of the community, then at least without doing enough to uplift it.

Molokana was one of a handful of businesspeople local youth could approach for financial support. These requests were usually for community events and initiatives run by local NGOs. A number of my interlocutors approached Molokana for financial support during my fieldwork. All of their requests fell on deaf ears. Molokana maintained that he did his bit for the community, supporting the local primary school and a feeding scheme, and insisted he could not be expected to help everyone. One young man who

³¹ This is not an isolated incident. There are numerous stories of people with 'political connections' to the ruling party acquiring RDP houses instead of their rightful owners. Some local residents underscored that irrespective of Molokana's relationship with the intended beneficiary (or lack thereof) he had acquired the house unlawfully because Motswako opened only three years after the house went up. The reasoning had to do with the housing amendment act that prohibits the sale of RDP houses for the first eight years after occupation.

volunteered with the youth NGO I discussed in Chapter Three accused Molokana of being ‘stingy’ when he snubbed his request for a donation towards a community sports event he was helping organise. In one of our discussions he pointed out that Molokana, who was rumoured to live in an upmarket housing estate in Fourways, would not be able to live his ‘nice life’ if it were not for the community of Zandspruit. He emphasised that it was local residents who made up the majority of his customer base to imply Molokana had a (moral) obligation to ‘give back’.

The criticism of obtaining wealth while bypassing obligations was levelled at a number of local businessmen in Zandspruit. ‘King P’ who owns a nightclub and bottle store in the community and is thought to have multiple luxury cars and girlfriends is perhaps the most controversial.³² The condemnation of local businessmen fed into wider concerns about the better off – and especially a political elite – who were accused of harnessing resources for themselves without care or concern for those less fortunate. Many of my interlocutors felt the political elite were chasing money and status and had given up on the struggle to improve the lives of the black majority. In several conversations young men referenced the elites’ consumption practices to point out their indifference to those with less and, even more strikingly, their abandonment of the liberation struggle.

³² In 2014, King P received a lot of media attention for throwing a lavish party at a nightclub in Sandown with the celebrity, Kenny Kunene, the so-called ‘Sushi-King’ (known for eating sushi off the bare bodies of young women in his nightclubs). King P was reported to have settled a bill worth R70 000 at the Sandown nightclub in 2014 (Moganedi 2014).

The rumours and disquiet that surround Molokana's wealth reflect wider concerns that emerged again and again in my conversations with young men. The first concerns the widespread assumption that those who get ahead do so illegitimately. The accusation of *illegitimacy* was not only about the means of obtaining wealth although the link between wealth, crime, and corruption was a common one. The indictment was also about the *authenticity* and, equally important, the *durability* of a person's wealth or status. These suspicions and accusations took different forms but targeted middle class patrons and local residents alike.

'Short-cut' to a good life

My interlocutors were especially vocal about local residents who drove expensive cars and spent large sums of money at Motswako. It was often implied that those who could 'show they could afford' had done so through 'short cuts'. The term was used to refer to money that was acquired quickly and thus deemed ethically suspect. While 'short cuts' most commonly referred to criminal or illicit activities the term was also used to index a wide-array of moneymaking activities. This included everything from gambling to local politics and a host of scams including the sale of fake diamonds. There was a widespread view that those who acquire money too hastily and without working for it are likely to lose it just as promptly. Moreover, people who make their money via 'short cuts' were seen to be more likely to spend it on conspicuous consumption rather than use it towards something more durable. One of my interlocutors put it like this: 'Some people get rich like that [via house break-ins] ... [but] they get rich for one day [only].'

On a few occasions when I asked one of my interlocutors to give me an example of someone who made their living ‘via shortcuts’ they asked me if I knew the Khumalo brothers. I did. Everyone knew Andile and Lucky. They had surfaced in many of my conversations and were seen to embody a mode of success forged through crime. I first met Andile at Khenzo’s car wash stand – a stone’s throw away from Motswako – in April 2015. He drove a diamond black Polo VW GTi with racing mags and could be found in this spot on most afternoons, standing around the boot of his car. He wore jeans, sneakers and a designer golf-shirt most days and was always with two or three other men. Andile’s younger brother, Lucky, who I saw less often, drove a Mini-cooper. The brothers lived together in a double-storey shack in the oldest section of the settlement with a yard big enough to park both cars inside. This was itself testament to their relative wealth. Most residents’ fill every inch of space they have with back-yard shacks to generate rental income.

My interlocutors never spoke directly about how Andile and Lucky made their money. It was only ever hinted at or spoken about in vague terms. Piecing together various discussions and observations I learned that Andile was a drug-dealer. He also sold branded trainers from his car boot. Lucky, on the other hand, was thought to be involved in more serious criminal activities (i.e. car-jackings). My interlocutors viewed the Khumalo brothers with a great deal of ambivalence. There is no doubt many local youth envied their material success and the constant attention they received from women. Their cars, designer clothes and spending of significant sums of money on

alcohol allowed them to assimilate into the symbolic economy of Motswako and those seen to be ‘making it’. Local youth’s desire to emulate the brothers’ image of success did not, however, stop them from invalidating it. My interlocutors were quick to draw attention to the fact that while Andile drove a top-end car like some of the ‘guys from the suburbs’ he still lived in a shack. One of my interlocutors had this to say about Andile: ‘You driving a nice car but you living in a shack with nothing [i.e. no furniture] inside’. Another interlocutor described him as ‘living broke to look expensive’. Comments like this were common. They sought to highlight the incongruity between the image of success Andile and Lucky project and their failure to move out of the settlement.

Efforts to invalidate the perceived status of those with relative wealth is perhaps unsurprising in a country with such extreme inequalities and where few people’s material aspirations are realised. Scholars have noted how in a context with high inequalities people often delegitimise those who get rich, especially when their money has been acquired through illegitimate means, while at the same time wanting to imitate them (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2002). It is this tension that underlies what the Comaroffs call the ‘paradox of occult economies’ (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 284). The conflicts and anxieties that surround proximate inequality have often been read through discourses of jealousy (James 2015, 47; Krige 2011a, 292), witchcraft (Ashforth 2005; Geschiere 1997) and occult cosmologies (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2002; West and Sanders 2003). I want to suggest that my interlocutor’s constant attempts to challenge the credibility of those who appear to be ‘making it’ are about more than ‘jealousy’ and the dangers of being seen to accumulate money without redistributing. My

interlocutors observe black wealth in their midst and dismiss it as fake and consider those who appear to look like they are making it to be pretending. The issue for many of my interlocutors is not simply that the Khumalo brothers are tricking the system or society into thinking they are more wealthy than they are in reality. My interlocutors were concerned that material possession and display could inculcate a fabricated sense of accomplishment that would blind them to the reality of their continued dispossession.

The lyrics of a hip-hop song one of my interlocutors wrote captured this sentiment especially well. The song is a muse on life in the 'ghetto'. In the song Kabelo reflects on what he calls people's 'obsession with money and fame' and describes his peers as 'trying to go forward but [instead] going in reverse' and being 'caught in a curse'. The lyrics make clear that Kabelo's criticism of those who 'love bluffing', as he put it, goes beyond the fabrication of status via consumption – a concern that has been exacerbated with the proliferation of counterfeit goods. What struck me most was Kabelo's contention that the acquisition of status symbols blinded people to the real forces that continue to oppress them. He thought 'bluffing' not only condemned young people to a life 'scavenging around the shacks' but also entrapped them in their own subjugation (the 'curse').

One sometimes hears a similar sentiment in public debates that suggest the black middle class are merely consumers rather than producers or investors in the economy. In 2015, for instance, William Gumede (2015) penned an article in the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper that lamented South Africa

becoming a ‘rent-seeking’ society that not only enriches a few but undermines the productive capacity of the whole economy over the long-term. This concern might be said to echo that of the Nigerian author of *Capitalist Nigger* (Onyeani 2006) who received much criticism for perpetuating racial stereotypes about black people’s lack of entrepreneurialism. However, I want to argue that buried beneath the surface of these assertions is a valid concern that the rise of a black middle class obscures the real structure of wealth and the continuing salience of race in South Africa’s enduring inequalities (Matsila 2017).

It is vital to stress that other youth were more nuanced in their assessments of the Khumalo brother’s choice of livelihood and their decision to stay in Zandspruit. Local youth are not naïve about the socio-economic impediments that make it unlikely for someone like Andile or Lucky to leave the settlement. Nor did local youth think it was always sensible to move out given the impossibility of sustaining a middle class life in the suburbs without a regular salaried job. Mandla, who has known Lucky since they were teenagers, explained to me that what keeps his brother and him in Zandspruit is the recognition that they cannot maintain their ‘lifestyle’ outside of Zandspruit. Mandla told me that if Lucky went to live in Cosmo City it would ‘take away the credit [status] he has here’.

There is a paradox here I want to unpack. While young people recognise that conspicuous consumption is often a façade for wealth they also have to contend with the fact that this might be the only currency available to them, however incomplete or fleeting, to acquire a sense of accomplishment and

inclusion. This is perhaps increasingly true in the contemporary era when the markers of identity, personal maturation, and social accomplishment – long attained or conceived of through reliable salaried work – are no longer available.

My interlocutors' views on the Khumalo brothers were complex not least because many of them recognised the appeal of 'short cuts'. A number had themselves been engaged in various kinds of criminal activities and fraudulent deals in the past, and in a few cases, admitted that this might be one of the only mechanisms for them to get ahead. Many of the same young men were also apprehensive to embrace a life of 'short cuts' and criticised those who did. A life of short cuts and constant 'hustling' was, on the one hand, seen to offer possibilities to make a quick buck, and even increase one's potential to obtain wealth and status symbols in the immediate present. On the other hand, it was seen to involve a resignation to a life characterised by precariousness and an all-consuming-present – what young men consider the antithesis of freedom.

Brad Weiss (2017, 205) recently pointed out how 'fast businesses' in urban Tanzania are contrasted with an idea of 'proper accumulation' that occurs at a steady pace. Likewise, 'short cuts' presume 'proper work' has a temporal form that is more measured and predictable. My interlocutors insist that money earned too quickly is a façade. It boosts one's status in the short-term while, at the same time, limiting one's chances of stable upward mobility and entry into the middle classes. Here we see the continued moral charge of wage labour that comes both from 'above' (as we saw at the youth rally)

and 'below' (from local youth themselves). Yet, as the next section illustrates, many of those seen to make their money via 'proper jobs' are also accused of living a 'false dream'.

'Living under credit'

It was not only local residents like the Khumalo brothers who had the veracity of their wealth scrutinised. It was often pointed out to me that the middle classes who come to Motswako are 'living under credit', as one young man put it. The perception amongst many of my interlocutors was that the consumption practices and lifestyles of the middle class they wished to imitate were funded by debt. In several conversations it was noted that unlike local taverns that operate on a cash-only basis Motswako had a card machine that allowed one to buy alcohol using a credit card. 'Someone will be earning R20 000 [\$1400] and be having a credit for R60 000 [\$4300] on credit card', Senzo told me over a beer at Motswako.

In several instances young men pointed out that the expensive cars that line the street on Saturdays and Sundays were bought on credit. One expression of this became especially clear during a conversation with Setsumi. He described an episode of the television drama 'Skeem Saam' about a schoolteacher who could not keep up with his payments for a BMW he had bought. 'The car is actually owned by the bank', Setsumi said, explaining that one should not be fooled into thinking that a person who drives an expensive car owns it. 'They [are] living a false dream', he said. To suggest someone does not really own their car is to question the authenticity of their

elevated status in a way that is not dissimilar to the discrediting of the Khumalo brothers' appearance of wealth.

It is important to stress that my interlocutors did not see indebtedness as the preserve of the relatively wealthy. It was often pointed out to me that many people in Zandspruit have to borrow money from local *mashonisas* (loan sharks) just to survive. A number of my interlocutors had found themselves stuck with store-card debt and been forced to take out a loan to get by at one time or another. One young man told me that the reason *mashonisas* do so well in Zandspruit is because 'people drink more than what they can earn in a month'. My interlocutors recognised the different aspects of indebtedness: the sheer demand for money that triggers borrowing; overspending due to wages being insufficient to support the lives people want to live; and the desire to 'show off' in a society where consumption is the primary marker of social distinction and respectability.

It is also important to recognise that people's views about debt varied, often quite significantly, depending on the relationships involved (debts between peers, institutions, within the family, etc.), and what the debt was being used for.³³ In recognising indebtedness as a shared reality for growing numbers of South Africans across social class³⁴, what scholars refer to as a

³³ Ethnographic research has highlighted the importance of studying everyday debt as plural rather than a singular phenomenon and shown the ways in which every day debts are embedded in specific social, cultural and moral orders (Han 2012; James 2015).

³⁴ South Africa is one of the most indebted countries in the world. In 2017 there were 24.31-million credit consumers – more than 8-million more people than the total number of

process of ‘financialisation’, research has shown that it is not the unemployed or poorest who are most indebted but salary and wage earners in the ‘new middle classes’ (James 2015, 2). It must also be noted that the media’s portrayal of the ‘new’ black middle class has been saturated with discourses of conspicuous consumption and a concern with rising indebtedness (Krige 2011a, 294–311). I was, nonetheless, still struck by the attention my interlocutors paid to the high levels of debt amongst the black middle class.

My interlocutors noted the ambivalence inherent in being in debt. They recognised the possibilities ‘credit’ provided to buy a car or move into the suburbs while simultaneously insisting on its dangers and moral hazards. These included more concrete concerns such as getting blacklisted for an impaired debt record. The debt-consumption nexus was also used as a metaphor for wider anxieties about social obligations and ties. The impulse to consume was seen to be having a destructive effect on society by orientating people’s investments to the present over the future and to the self over others. I heard this concern expressed most clearly in the phrase that someone was ‘forgetting where they come from’. The phrase was most commonly directed at someone who was accused of acquiring wealth without redistributing it and thus prioritising their own individual status over their families. Christine Jeske (2016, 492) made a similar observation

employed people in South Africa (Ferreira 2017). 39 per cent of these credit-active consumers in South Africa have impaired debt records – according to the latest report from the National Credit Regulator (Van Rensburg 2018). It is important to note that these figures do not account for informal debt.

in her research in Kwa-Zulu Natal and suggests that it is these social and temporal anxieties and conflicts that result in cars occupying a ‘morally suspect place in society.’

A story Senosi told during an afternoon I spent with him and a group of men at the youth-NGO office gives a sense of the ambiguity that surrounds the nexus of consumption, status, and debt. Our conversation that day had been prompted by a comment Arnold made about the growing social pressures to engage in visible consumption. Senosi joined the conversation by telling us about his neighbour, Tumi, who had recently bought a VW Polo GTi ‘on instalment’. Tumi was twenty-eight, had a job at a call-centre³⁵, and lived with his mother in an RDP house in Zandspruit. Senosi explained that he had bought the car to ‘show off’ and ‘keep up with his [older] brother’ who drove a BMW and lived in one of the larger bonded houses in Cosmo City.

Senosi’s views on Tumi’s decision to purchase a car ‘on credit’ were not straightforward. ‘His story proves’, he said, ‘that we black people tend to go for things we cannot afford to show off’. ‘We say this guy is driving a rented car’, he said with a smirk on his face. ‘That’s what it’s called until it’s yours [because] at any point it can be taken [repossessed]’. Senosi depicted Tumi in both a critical and sympathetic light. Although Senosi questioned Tumi’s decision to purchase a car he could not really afford, and noted his

³⁵ Senosi estimated he earned a basic salary of R6000 (\$430) before commission. This is not enough to cover the instalments on a brand new VW Golf GtI. Either he earned more or he bought his car second-hand or off the black market.

unease about Tumi residing with (and depending) upon his mother instead of the other way around, he also sympathised with Tumi a great deal. Senosi recognised that what propels many people into debt is the social pressure and competition to wear expensive clothes or drive a car to increase one's social status (not least to impress and attract women). At no point in our conversation did Senosi suggest he would do any differently if he had the means (or access to credit) to buy a car. Intriguingly, access to 'formal' credit was understood as one of the primary benefits (and dangers) of having a 'proper' job. It was also a defining feature of 'being' middle class.

It took me a while to understand why Senosi emphasised that Tumi's car was only 'rented'. At first I interpreted our conversation that day as an expression of Senosi's envy. Or, his frustration that Tumi was successfully duping everyone into thinking he was richer than he was. It was only later I came to see that Senosi's main concern had less to do with the fact that the possession of a car allowed Tumi to be recognised in public as being wealthier than he actually is. This is not to say Senosi did not feel slighted by Tumi's relative success. He did. Over time I came to see that young men's disquiet about growing levels of debt, much like their concerns with 'short cuts', refracted real distress about their limited prospects of getting ahead. It also reflects the wider anxieties about the meanings of freedom and success in a world where the lines between real and fake are increasingly blurred.

Conclusion

The notion of 'bluffing' or 'faking it' 'operates by drawing a comparison with a state or course of action that is deemed to be 'true' or 'real'. To label

the Khumalo brothers' and Tumi's observable wealth as 'fake' is to judge it as being at odds with their 'real' economic circumstances. Normativity is thus built into the notion of 'faking it'. It is worth noting that both the Khumalo brothers and Tumi's status is deemed 'fake' precisely because they are viewed to have accumulated money in an improper way via short cuts or credit. I have suggested that underneath the accusation of falsity lies the very real distress of being excluded from the economy in any meaningful way. My interlocutors not only accuse the relatively affluent at Motswako of 'faking it' but also of blinding themselves to their continued dispossession. This also connects to the earlier argument in which consumption is seen to operate as a cover-up for the structural inequalities that remain in place. I argue the discourses and rumours that concern the illegitimacy of wealth can be seen as a critique of the contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa. They are also, I suggest, an experiential account of the rise of 'casino capitalism' where wealth is increasingly detached from labour (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 2002).

Urban youth's concern with the blurring of the lines between the real and the fake registers the contradictions and disjunctures in their lives. It also provides a posture or way of apprehending a world that is experienced as fragmented, contradictory and disquieting. As a *register*, the suspicion and accusation of falsity gives expression to the overriding sense many young men have of being left behind and thus excluded from democracy's promise of prosperity. It thus registers the sense that South Africa's revolution is at best, an incomplete project, and at worst, a dupe. As a *posture*, it offers a way for young men to make sense, in moral terms, that the unlikelihood of their 'making it' into the middle class is not just temporary bad luck but

perhaps even inevitable or a calculated effect of ‘the system’. Falsity is thus an expression and response to the structural inequalities – and ever-growing unemployment – that have undermined the possibilities of what ‘freedom’ could have meant. And yet, despite the widespread feelings of grievance and disenchantment, young men are not consumed by fits of rage or frustration nor have they, at least entirely, resigned themselves to fate or apathy.

The young men I spent time with cannot be characterised in binary terms: they are neither optimistic nor despairing when it comes to their futures. They instead approach their current lives and their attempts to improve them with a pragmatic realism. This pragmatic attitude or ‘thug realism’, to use Weiss’s (2002) phrase, is fully conscious of the slim odds of ever attaining the kinds of middle class lives they yearn for. In fact, part of this pragmatic attitude rests precisely on a full grasp of their structural exclusion from the (mainstream) economy. While this no doubt results in young men feeling anxious and defeated at times, it is also true that young men continue to construct viable lives for themselves within adverse conditions – and to imagine improved ones. So while the contradictions of post-apartheid South Africa have unravelled the ‘miracle narrative’ of 1994 and undermined the ANC’s ‘politics of optimism’ (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 293), these same contradictions are shaping young men’s demands in the political sphere.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Introduction

On Sunday 25th October 2015, two days after thousands of university students marched to the union buildings (the official seat of the national government) in protest against fee increases, I got a flood of messages asking if I was coming to Zandspruit. Julius Malema, the controversial leader of the far left opposition party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), was rumored to be speaking at a rally later that day. I arrived in Zandspruit at 2pm to find a large crowd gathered around a red gazebo and white *bakkie* opposite the primary school. This was one of many EFF rallies that took place that weekend in informal settlements and townships across the province. The rallies sought to mobilise support for the party's 'Economic Freedom March' on the 27th of October. I stood with Sizwe and his neighbour, who was wearing one of the EFF's signature red berets. Sizwe's shack was only a few yards from the truck around which everyone had congregated. We had been waiting for over an hour when Malema finally arrived. As he got out of the car and stepped onto the *bakkie*, the crowd erupted with raised fists and shouts of 'Ju Ju Ju Ju'. Some residents had climbed on top of their shacks to get a glimpse of the commander-in-chief, as he is known. He began his speech that day with a stinging indictment of the ruling ANC government. 'There is no better life in Zandspruit', he said, decrying that twenty one years after the end of apartheid the majority of residents in informal settlements lived in shacks without reliable water and electricity. 'It's like [living in] a jail [...] you are not free', he said.



Figure 10: Economic Freedom Fighters rally in Zandspruit

After listing the pressing service delivery and infrastructural needs of the community he then turned to the failure of the post-1994 government to transform the economy that condemns the black majority to a life of unemployment and destitution. ‘The ANC sold out black people’, he said, accusing the ANC of protecting ‘white capital’ and betraying black aspirations. ‘How can you say you are free when you have no money?’, he asked. He continued: ‘Your mothers who work as domestic workers for white bosses cleaning fancy houses with furniture they themselves could never afford. They are being raped [and only] keep quiet because they are afraid of losing the job that stands between them and poverty’. Without pause Malema then weighed in on the steep rise in the practice of labour brokering. ‘[Labour brokers] take the little salary you make and keep you

poorer. R2500 is not enough', he said, to loud applause and cheers. In these jobs, he continued, 'you're basically working for free'.

Malema had his finger on the pulse of young people's disillusionment with democracy's promise of material advancement. We see this is the widespread perception of 'betrayal' (Mbembe 2011) and 'abandonment' (Dubbeld 2013). The 'sell-out' narrative resonates with the vast majority of ordinary South Africans who feel that they have very little to show for twenty years of freedom. Malema sharpens the contradictions of South Africa's 'liberation and liberalisation' (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 2002) that saw citizenship extended to the majority of black South Africans at the same time as the state was disabled from ensuring its citizens of a regular income. Malema voices the widespread perception that South Africa is still in many respects, as Thabo Mbeki noted in the early 2000s, a country of two worlds: the first rich and white, the second poor and black.

One of the central arguments of this thesis is that urban youth in Zandspruit are dissatisfied with and often refuse to take up precarious and low-paying work, despite exceedingly high rates of unemployment. Young men's incorporation into low-paying jobs is rarely experienced as meaningful inclusion, but rather as confirmation of their structural exclusion. Paradoxically, it was through young men's inclusion in the labour market that they came to grasp the deeply embedded injustices and stark inequalities that not only characterise the post-apartheid workplace but also pervade South African society.

Malema taps into this groundswell of resentment when he equates working for ‘R2500’ with ‘working for free’ and uses rape as a metaphor to conjure an image of an economic system synonymous with black exploitation.³⁶ Like Malema, a number of my interlocutors are the sons of domestic workers and can attest to the painful reality of having watched their mothers work for decades to only remain poor and without a brick-and-mortar house to call their own. Young men also know from their own experience that racism and insecurity remain the order of the day in the workplace. Irrespective of what people think of Malema himself, or his brand of politics, the story he tells resonates with the poor and unemployed. Malema gives voice to and thus legitimises ordinary people’s anger at continued inequality and racial privilege. But perhaps more importantly, he offers a structural explanation for people’s marginalisation and exclusion from the (mainstream) economy. This is significant when contrasted with the self-responsibility and entrepreneurial rhetoric that is increasingly characteristic of the ANC’s policy-speak – the rhetoric we saw at the youth NGO (Chapter Three) and the youth-rally (Chapter Six). Equally Malema also articulates people’s material aspirations and political claims for social inclusion.

Malema’s speech provides a useful point of departure to discuss the key findings of this study and to reflect on the wider social and political repercussions of the decline of wage work in South Africa and beyond. The

³⁶ Malema uses rape metaphorically to not only refer to the subordination and abuse of an individual person but also to a form of ‘racial capitalism’ or ‘racial Fordism’ (Gelb 1991) premised on ‘anti-blackness’ (Barchiesi 2016a, 891) and a conception of the human as ‘waste’ (Mbembe 2011, 6).

aim of this thesis was to carefully examine the everyday economic and social lives of the so-called unemployed to better understand their collective prospects and possibilities. Consequently, this study set out not only to explore how young men make a living outside the formal economy, but also to offer insight into the implications of the unbundling of the historically close relationship between wage work and the social order. The significance of this inquiry therefore rests on an appreciation that wage work has never simply been about acquiring an income. Rather work has long been a central organising force of society, both in South Africa and globally. It is thus constitutive of how we think about self, citizenship, family, gender roles and identities, and also larger moral and political questions that concern the distribution of wealth and the right to rewards for one's labour.

This thesis makes a conceptual intervention by actively resisting the dominant understanding of *unemployment* and its associated languages of deficiency. I have deliberately eschewed a framework of 'crisis' that presents unemployment as an aberration and a threat to stability rather than a constant feature of the South African economy and an everyday reality for millions of South Africans. I have thus sought to move away from an understanding of unemployment that is defined negatively by an absence, be it an absence of income, something to do, or a place in society. In approaching unemployment as a 'social field' from which young men seek new bearings and construct viable lives for themselves I have sought to re-think unemployment as a site of possibility, new orderings, and political struggle – and not only rupture, uncertainty, and fragmentation.

In drawing attention to the productivity of unemployment, this thesis offers an account of unemployment not as a 'social death' (Vigh 2006, 104) but rather as a different way of living. In doing so, I suggest that unemployment can be viewed as an agentic and socially productive experience in the sense that it is a condition characterised by a multitude of actions, choices, and complex relations of inter-dependence.

The 'productivity of unemployment' is thus an attempt to see life where it has often been denied. I have taken inspiration from approaches that privilege creativity over crisis (E. Cooper and Pratten 2015; Vigh 2008) and thus use the term 'productivity' to challenge a view of the unemployed as one of permanent marginalisation. Instead, I have sought to draw attention to unemployment as a complex praxis that involves youth's attempt to create viable lives for themselves 'within limits' (Jackson 2011) that are at once material and moral. This involves men's attempts to get by in the immediate present but also the struggle to steer their lives in a direction that is both viable and meaningful in the future.

One of the key interventions of this thesis has been to foreground the moral dimension of young men's economic and social lives. Throughout this thesis I have drawn attention to ways in which moral evaluation permeates young men's everyday practices, relationships, choices, and their own interpretations of the wider structures they operate within. This thesis makes the case for viewing value-based considerations as a critical component of youths' 'navigation' (Vigh 2006) of the social world. In contexts where the moral order is itself in flux and contested there is much

to be gained from attending to the concepts of the moral or ethical as they emerge in everyday life. This includes people's judgements around what is considered a 'good' or 'proper' job or a socially legitimate source of income (Chapter Three and Four); contestations that surround the social claims on men's money and who is viewed as deserving of support (Chapter Five); along with the discourses and rumours about the illegitimacy and fallacy of other's wealth (Chapter Six). This thesis is itself an attempt to reclaim the cultural 'thickness' of social navigation as a moral practice. Throughout this thesis I have showcased how values and norms provide a constraint on action but are, at the same time, a critical part of how people assert and maintain a sense of agency.

This project has enhanced our understanding of morality as a terrain of action that is embedded in ideological, socio-economic and political legacies. Moreover, this research has demonstrated the value of a moral economy framework to comprehend the distribution of power and resources at various levels – from the household and neighbourhood to the macro processes of global capital – and the ways in which they intersect with one another. By taking ordinary people's agency seriously without overlooking the powerful structures they operate within, this thesis has shown how the anthropological revival of the concept of 'moral economy' offers a way to reconcile a structuralist and subjective approach to understanding larger political-economy processes. In short: this study makes a noteworthy contribution to a growing body of literature that positions moral economy as an 'anthropological way to study the political economy' (Palomera and Vetta 2016, 428).

In attending to the generative dimension of unemployment this study has drawn attention to the ways in which the decline in wage work is engendering new, largely inchoate and improvised identities, modes of belonging, ethical practice, and political demands. Consequently, this research offers a critique of the existing social science scholarship on youth unemployment, which has tended to present unemployed youth as lacking agency and without control over their hopes or future. By foregrounding much wider social transformations, including the decline of marriage and the increasingly matrifocality of family relations in South Africa, this thesis has highlighted the need to move away from the normative undercurrents of much of the scholarship on 'youth' and 'men and masculinities'. To fail to do so risks endorsing a nostalgic narrative for a social order premised on male work and the male-led household (J. L. Jones 2009). This of course highlights the need for further research on the voices and perspectives of young black women on changing gender, family and household relations in the context of systemic unemployment and economic uncertainty. A focus on young women was beyond the scope of this study but is an important area for additional future research. Further research might also explore young women's economic decisions and movements in and out of jobs to better understand how gender, as well as other factors such as geography (e.g. urban versus rural areas), and the number of dependents shapes the dynamics of incorporation in the labour market and local economy.

Three key findings arise from the discourse and practice of my interlocutors in relation to the agential and productive dimension of unemployment.

First, unemployment is not characterised by stasis but rather by a multitude of activities and complex relations of inter-dependence. This reality negates what are essentially racist stereotypes: the assumptions that unemployed youth are idle and unproductive, which themselves rest on the belief that 'real' or socially valuable work only takes place in the formal economy. Second, unemployment is an enduring feature of the South African landscape that is actively reconfiguring the shape and form of gender relations, family life, and social obligations. Viewing unemployment as generative is thus an attempt to make visible the ways in which social life is always in the making. Those rendered 'surplus' to capital are always living and making lives for themselves under adverse conditions. This perspective surfaces the indeterminacy of social life and the provisional and prospective dimension of young people's lives. Third, by attending to the productivity of unemployment this thesis challenges the normative centrality of wage work and contributes to new scholarly and social policy debates on work, gender, family and citizenship in southern Africa.

Economic life outside or beyond the wage

This thesis has provided a fine-grained account of the economic and social lives of young men who are either unemployed or precariously employed. The significance of this cannot be overstated when close to 40 per cent of South Africa's population are without a job, a figure that increases to 66 per cent for young people between the ages of 15 and 34 (StatsSA 2016). This picture bears similarities to changes taking place in many other contexts, and can thus be viewed as a reflection of broader trends under late capitalism that makes growing numbers of people economically redundant (Breman 1994; Ferguson 2015; Harvey 2007; Li 2010).

This section summarizes the different modes of dependence young men rely upon to make a living and their operation within wider redistributive networks and forms of inter-dependence. It also discusses the complexity of differentiation and inequalities within Zandspruit and similar localities; and how the dynamics of the wage economy and the informal economy articulate with and are interdependent on one another. These findings underpin the case that this thesis makes for analysing economic and social life as a complex but unitary phenomenon.

In drawing attention to the ways in which young people make a living outside of wage work this thesis has highlighted that unemployment is not simply a function of the unavailability of jobs. This does not deny the fact that South Africa's unemployment is structural, and one of the highest in the world. It is rather an attempt to reckon with the reality that many people are neither fully employed nor fully unemployed, and thus the futility of making a sharp division between the two. This thesis has therefore shown the importance of shifting analytical focus away from a narrow focus on wage labour to processes of distribution and exchange. The benefit of an approach that focuses on distributive practices (Ferguson 2015) is its ability to make legible the social processes involved in people's economic activities that often defy dualist categories of waged/unwaged, formal/informal, and employed/unemployed.

Most contemporary accounts of Africa's growing urban populations have attended to the creativity of urban life as 'a kind of improvisation under

conditions of adversity' (Ferguson 2015, 94; Simone 2004; Mbembe and Roitman 1995). There is an extensive literature on 'hustling' (Di Nunzio 2012; Thieme 2018), 'zig-zagging' (J. L. Jones 2010), 'improvisation' (Simone 2004; Young, Kumar, and Jeffrey 2017) and 'social navigation' (Vigh 2006). However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which people in Africa reject the wage relation in favour of alternative modes of provision, and the potential this holds for developing our empirical and theoretical understandings of work and economic life beyond and outside the wage economy.

In Chapter Three, I deconstructed James Ferguson's monolithic category of 'dependence' to explore the different 'modes of (in)dependence' young men have available to them, choose, or fall into. This allowed me to illustrate the impossibility of separating young men's modes of provision from the wider web of social relations in which they are embedded. By tracing the appeal of livelihoods outside the wage I have shown that the rejection of low-wage work is *not* simply a response to its intolerability but, at least in some cases, a preference for alternative modes of socioeconomic life and a positive aspiration for self-determination and social mobility. Especially important was the contrast I drew in Chapter Three between 'labouring', which is closely associated with being subservient to whites, and alternative modes of getting-by, including 'hustling' in the street economy and 'volunteering' in local NGOs. The day-labour market is illustrative of the highly insecure and fragile work young men avoid where the relationship between the employee and employer is not only highly unequal but also reduced to an absolute minimum. What young men refuse is not wage work per se, but rather erratic and fragile work that does not produce a desirable

mode of dependency. This study has gone some way toward enhancing our understanding that people do not avoid being dependent as such, but rather seek to construct more viable forms of inter-dependence.

In discussing the decisions and trajectories of youth like Sibongile, who left his job at a call centre to ‘volunteer’ full time at the local NGO, and Thatho, who works as a local ‘connector’ in the informal electricity market, I have shown that to stay away from wage labour in the capitalist economy takes all sorts of social and economic capital, including financial resources, access to property, dense local ties and friendships. I have thus shown that those who can afford to be unemployed by rejecting or refusing wage work are those who are deeply embedded within the social and economic terrain of Zandspruit. This runs counter to common sense and scholarly understandings of how the labour market functions. It is often assumed that those with urban social ties are at a greater advantage in terms of finding work in the formal economy (Lekana 2006; Schoer and Leibbrandt 2006; Seekings and Nattrass 2015, 127). While most people *do* find out about job opportunities via their social connections, I have shown that local connections and ties can have the opposite effect, in that those with denser social connections are often less desperate and therefore able to exercise greater choice in the labour market. This underscores the importance of disaggregating between different kinds of jobs and modes of provisioning. We must examine the nature of segmentation not only within the urban labour market (between low-paying and better-paying jobs), but also within a highly differentiated informal economy (between survivalist activities and lucrative niches).

In Chapter Four I argued that it is those with privileged access to social ties and property who are more likely to avoid low-wage work. This both complicates and qualifies Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass's (2005) 'underclass' thesis. It suggests that some of those deemed 'surplus' to capital – who make a living outside of wage work – might be better conceptualised as a relatively privileged class rather than part of an undifferentiated 'underclass'. This argument rests on conceptualising the economy as a 'differentiated whole' (Callebert 2014; du Toit and Neves 2007) and informal settlements as a 'system of distributed livelihoods' (Ferguson 2015, 94) in which the formal and informal are intricately woven and dependent upon one another.

In Chapter Two I documented Zandspruit's history and argued that we lose a crucial part of the story if we fail to look at Zandspruit's expansion, densification, and economy in relation to wider economic and spatial dynamics. This includes the growth of Johannesburg northwards and the shift towards an increasingly service sector economy concentrated in the north of Johannesburg. This feeds into one of the central arguments of this project regarding the co-production of urban space, economies and social dependencies. The resources of those who work in the so-called formal economy outside of Zandspruit are distributed through the informal economy. These formal-sector wages that flow into the community are what many of my interlocutors draw upon to make a living outside the wage relation.

This thesis argues that a discussion on the relationship between capital and labour cannot ignore the markers of difference and inequality that characterise specific socio-spatial locations such as Zandspruit. This includes the fault-lines of nationality, gender, age, residential status and intersectional categories such as ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Equally important are the forms of differentiation that relate to the structuring of land and housing ownership. It is not coincidental that the majority of immigrants in Zandspruit, especially men, are employed in some of the lowest-paying jobs, and are also tenants. As Trevor Ngwane (2010) points out, immigrants provide a cheap labour force for the South African economy but also serve as an easily exploitable ‘tenant class’ within informal rental markets. This points to the importance of integrating an analysis of the social relations and local power dynamics structuring land and rental markets within informal settlements and the dynamics of incorporation within the labour market (Desai and Loftus 2013; Ngwane 2010). Further research could more closely examine the relationship between the rental and labour market.

This thesis has shown that one cannot understand the dynamics of incorporation in the wage economy without understanding those of the informal economy. The wage and wageless economies are not structurally disconnected but rather form a differentiated but unevenly integrated economic terrain. A similar idea underlies the works of Callebert (2014), du Toit and Neves (2007, 2014) and Ferguson (2015). I have extended their approach by demonstrating the importance of integrating an analysis of the housing, land, and rental market with an analysis of labour and work. It has also allowed me to locate the agency of young men within the economic and political structures they find themselves. Matteo Rizzo (2017) has recently

criticised the post-colonial literature on economic informality for celebrating the agency and determination of the poor (Simone 2004) and thus overlooking the structural forces shaping young men's lives. By examining how choice is structured (Chapter Four) I have refrained from romanticising the agency and choices of the poor and sought to approach questions of labour and livelihood in a historically and empirically grounded way.

It is not only the different sectors of the economy or wage earners and non-wage earners that are interdependent. Young men are also bound up in relations of interdependency between friends, neighbours, lovers, children, and kin. The discussion in Chapter Five shows how young men walk a fine line between limiting (or sometimes concealing) their sources of income to stay afloat themselves while also distributing enough to warrant a future claim to support. This thesis has also attempted to show that young men's decisions to accept or reject certain jobs cannot be viewed in isolation from the social demands of those with wage work. Though it might seem logical that domestic commitments and social obligations to siblings, parents, girlfriends, children and friends would force young men to take *any* job, I have shown that the refusal of the lowest-paying and insecure jobs is often precisely because of this social burden. Constructing oneself as unemployed is thus one of the few strategies young men have to hold on to their limited resources and decide what they want to do with them.

In drawing attention to the ways in which young people's economic practices are mediated by their social connections and obligations I have

demonstrated the importance of shifting the study of work away from the workplace or shop floor to the neighbourhood. The thesis proposed that we view informal settlements such as Zandspruit as sites where processes of production, distribution, and consumption are not entirely separate domains but enmeshed within specific place-bound relational configurations and circuits of exchange. This approach is especially important in an era of growing joblessness and precarious work, when working and not-working are fluid categories.

Viewing labour and livelihood as distributive practices and shifting our analysis away from the workplace to the neighbourhood not only reflects the reality that fewer people are employed in any traditional sense. It also recognises what feminist scholars have been arguing for some time now: wage labour power only exists because of the social labour of reproduction, which includes relations of reciprocity, intimacy and care. This thesis therefore proposes an understanding of economic and social life in its totality as a complex yet unitary social process. By insisting on the centrality of social relations to the economy as a whole and to people's individual livelihood projects it becomes impossible to study social life in neat partitions of work and non-work. The various chapters in this thesis critique the idea and moral status of economic productivity in which 'work' is abstracted from 'life' (Millar 2014; Thieme 2018). Taken together, this study demonstrates that the informal settlements where growing numbers of Africa's so-called 'surplus populations' *make* a living (as opposed to *earn* one) are dynamic social terrains of 'habitation, livelihood and politics' (Roy 2011).

The politics of refusing work

The common portrayal of unemployed youth as a ‘lost generation’ (Seekings 1996) and a ‘ticking time-bomb’ is premised on the presumption that those stuck in a condition of ‘waithood’ (Honwana 2012) are predisposed towards anarchy and violent engagement with society (Kaplan 1994; Sommers 2006; Urdal 2004). I have argued that this framing is not only incorrect, but is also misleading. The world of the unemployed I examine in this dissertation is nothing like Kaplan’s (1994, 1) portrayal of young idle men crowding the streets of urban centres in West Africa like ‘loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting’. Viewing youth as a ‘lost generation’ depicts the unemployed as not only without income but also without anything to do or a place in society. This thesis has shown that while the effects of mass unemployment are devastating and truncate the ‘possibilities of life’ (Mbembe 2011), unemployment is at the same time eliciting – even demanding – new relations and modes of economic collaboration. I have shown that the unemployed are neither inactive, nor are they in a state of ‘unbelonging’ (Ferguson 2015, 152). The construction of youth as a threat to stability is the projection of fear rather than an empirical fact.

Rendering unemployed youth as a ‘ticking-time-bomb’ not only presumes a course of action that is imagined rather than one based on evidence.³⁷ It also

³⁷ As Luisa Enria (2018) demonstrates in her work with youth in post-conflict Sierra Leone, the mechanism that links labour market exclusion and political violence is far from automatic.

conceptualises ‘the political’ as a singular event rather than an everyday practice that is embedded within broader configurations of social, economic, cultural and political forces. If young people are not ‘waiting’ for work but rather actively constructing lives for themselves within structures that are adversely constrained, and in some cases even strategizing to avoid taking up wage work, then what form does the ‘political’ take?

There is a political significance to the refusal of wage work that has not yet been elaborated on. In documenting young men’s rejection of low-wage work in contemporary South Africa, this thesis has drawn attention to a long pedigree of urban black young men avoiding work in the capitalist economy. A critical contribution of this thesis has been to provide the empirical basis to trace the continuities and discontinuities between South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past and the present-day. Crucially, this longer history of the black refusal of wage work is not only overlooked in most contemporary accounts of unemployment but, as Barchiesi (2016b, 167) notes, has also historically been dismissed by labour scholars as ‘resistance to proletarianisation’.

In the introductory chapter I discussed how the apartheid state viewed the lives of urban youth who scorned formal employment and made a living informally as a ‘parasitical existence’ (Seekings and Nattrass 2005, 169), which bred crime and disorder. This was at a time when the state strictly

There is no direct link between unemployment and political violence; rather it is mediated by social factors and the specific nature of the political-economy.

regulated black people's movement and participation in the labour market. The apartheid state also systematically crushed and criminalised the informal economy, making illegal beer brewing, gambling or informal trade a form of resistance. The figure of the '*tsotsi*' or 'gangster' in urban townships came to symbolise urban youth who rejected formal employment. Doing so was understood as a profoundly political act with an anti-state agenda. What of now? Has the refusal of work lost the ideological agenda and political language of liberation that gave it its meaning in the past? How are we to understand and conceptualise the refusal of work today in political terms?

On first glance one might suppose that the refusal of work is no longer a political act, at least not as it once was. During apartheid, the state had power but no legitimacy. The ANC-government today has legitimacy – it is democratically elected and has support (albeit waning) amongst the poor and unemployed. Yet there is widespread disenchantment with democracy and what it promised. The disenchantment that Julius Malema taps into also undergirds the surge in political protests since the mid-2000s (Alexander 2010; Dawson 2014a), the unravelling of the ANC's hegemony, and the rise of populist political actors such as the EFF. The ANC government has been unable to fundamentally change the structure of the South African economy. The economy remains dominated by mining and finance – what has come to be known in South Africa as the 'mineral energy complex' (Fine and Rustonjee 1996). This has failed to include the majority of the population in the economy in any meaningful way. The continued economic legacy of apartheid gives Malema's rhetoric more than an element of truth. I would argue that it is precisely the contradictions of South Africa's 'liberation and liberalisation' (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 2002) – and the widespread

feeling that political equality has not resulted in any substantial economic equality – that makes the refusal of work not simply an individual act, but also a deeply political one.

This thesis takes the refusal of wage work to be an expression of discontent with a segmented and racially ordered economy. To refuse work is to not consent to the adverse terms of incorporation. It is an expression of dissatisfaction and a critique of neoliberal capital that is not only making vast numbers of people redundant but continues to incorporate people on terms that make having a job both insufficient for a decent life and, in many cases, a dehumanizing and degrading experience. This refusal is not limited only to my interlocutors. It is also evident in the exceptionally high levels of churn in the labour market in South Africa by international standards (Kerr 2018). While there is no doubt that the volatility in the South African labour market is in part a function of many jobs being inherently precarious and thus erratic and short-term, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests ‘voluntary quitting’ is both frequent and deliberate, especially amongst young black South Africans (Ranchhod 2013; Zizzamia 2018, 56, 80).

The refusal of work and quitting low-wage jobs is by no means automatic and is only rarely categorical. The act of refusal or the quitting of low-wage jobs is mediated by multiple social factors that are at once structural and subjective, material and moral. While the outright rejection of low-wage work might be a choice only available to the relatively privileged, I want nonetheless to propose that the volatility in the labour market is the product

of a much wider disenchantment with the post-apartheid workplace than has been acknowledged. I am suggesting that the churn in the labour market might be less an imposition from above – or simply the outcome of neoliberal labour practices – but rather a reflection of a widespread ambivalence towards wage work amongst black people. It is an expression of discontent with South Africa's 'precarious liberation' (Barchiesi 2011).

The refusal of work stems from a sense of injustice but also a 'sense of entitlement' (Li 2017) that is closely tied to the expectations of the liberation struggle and the transition to democracy. As McGranahan (2016) observed, refusal is not just about resistance but can be 'generative' and hopeful in the sense that it insists on 'the possible over the probable' (2016, 323). This thesis makes the case that the refusal of work is not only a critique of the state or an economic order that excludes the majority. The refusal of work also involves a positive aspiration and political demand. It is integrally entangled in questions that have to do with what *ought* to be as well as what is *due* to a group of people or citizens. These are not only political questions in the sense that they concern the distribution of resources and power but also moral or ethical ones in that they contend with what is or *should* be considered 'just' or 'fair'. The refusal of work must therefore be viewed as a political project that is not only about resistance but also about demanding social inclusion, belonging and recognition.

It is important to emphasise that this political claim – what James Ferguson (2015, 168) has recently called a demand for one's 'rightful share' – is rarely expressed in an explicit or specific form. In fact, it is perhaps best

captured in the moral discourses and judgements my interlocutors use to categorise ‘good’ or ‘proper’ as opposed to ‘bad’ or ‘piece’ jobs. The politics of refusing work is also discernable in the explanations and justifications my interlocutors give for quitting jobs, and in the types of work they deem appropriate. The explanations these young men give for leaving jobs are often couched in explicitly moral language. Likewise, young men used value-laded language to express their scorn for low-wage jobs and their demand for ‘fair’ compensation. These claims are framed in terms of citizenship (and in the discourse of rights), together with wider moral discourses premised on ideals of dignity and moral worth. In Chapter Six I showed that young people often depict their current lives and circumstances either in terms of what they lack (i.e. a ‘proper’ job) or in opposition to a preferred state of being (i.e. ‘living’ rather than ‘surviving’). My argument here is that to define oneself as being without land, a house and a job – the very substance of the idea of freedom and citizenship – is also to make a political claim to these things. The young people I spoke with often explicitly draw a connection between their individual experiences of being unable to improve their lives with a critique of the ANC-government, one that links to a wider narrative of betrayal and exclusion from the ‘new’ South Africa (Dawson 2014a).

The refusal of work also involves a paradox. In most instances, my interlocutors’ resistance to certain forms of low-wage work exists alongside an attachment to or desire for a ‘proper’ job. People’s selective incorporation in the labour market exists alongside an aspirational claim or insistence that jobs must pay enough to go beyond basic sustenance or survival to provide the means to live. I have argued that the category of

‘proper work’ is a powerful emic category that cannot be dismissed. Young men use the concept of ‘proper’ work as a yardstick to evaluate their current economic situation but perhaps also as a ‘tactical appropriation’ of the centrality of the worker-citizen nexus to make their claims to belonging both legible and acceptable to those in power (Barchiesi 2012b, 247).

The concept of a ‘proper’ job is more than a vernacular understanding of dignified work. It refers to a whole social imaginary tied to male breadwinning and a sense of personal maturation and progression. Like the desire for a ‘proper’ job, the refusal of work has as much to do with the need for material security and social mobility as it does with a nostalgia for a social order that was historically premised on men’s wages. It is therefore important to resist the ‘impulse to sanitize’ the politics of refusing work (Ortner 1995, 179), or to view it simply in terms of domination and class struggle. The individual act of refusing work is not only enabled by local forms of inequality and asymmetry, as we saw in Chapter Three and Four, but is also closely tied up with an assertion of gender hierarchies, nationalisms and localisms.

In her article ‘Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal’, Sherry Ortner (1995) views ethnography as the answer to what she sees as the thinness in interdisciplinary resistance studies. An ethnographic approach, she argued, would enable an understanding of ‘the internal politics of dominated groups... the cultural richness of those groups... [and] the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in these dramas’ (Ortner 1995, 190). This thesis has attempted to show that

the refusal of wage work cannot be understood simply in relation to the state (as might have been the case during apartheid when the state regulated the labour market) or neoliberal capital. It needs to be viewed in relation to highly localised power differences as well as processes of inclusion and exclusion and self/other distinctions. In this case study, these take the form of both patriarchy and xenophobia.

The refusal to do certain forms of work is closely tied to an anti-foreigner sentiment. My interlocutors resented exploited and oppressed foreigners for undercutting the labour market. As Jean and John Comaroff note, the immigrant becomes a visual manifestation of democracy's failure when there is only work available for 'nonstandard' workers who will 'take anything they can get' (2002, 797). There is a utility to foreigners' disproportionate incorporation in certain low-end jobs and the anti-immigrant sentiment that goes along with it. It was especially evident in the xenophobic arguments I heard to justify why foreigners should pay more rent and be refused access to buy land. These xenophobic forms of exclusion force immigrants into the position of being a highly exploited worker and rental class that not only benefits employers but also property owners in Zandspruit (Ngwane 2010). This again highlights the importance of viewing the economy as a differentiated *whole* while also retaining the analytical power of the concept of class as a *relation* of power.

Political possibilities and policy questions

Du Toit and Neves (2014, 847) have recently pointed out that while South Africa's impoverished population is 'economically redundant' they are

‘politically central’. The consequence of this political centrality is that the legitimacy of the ANC-government as well as any serious opposition party rests to a significant extent on their ability to represent the interests and needs of the unemployed poor (du Toit and Neves 2014, 840). This is what made the entrance of the EFF onto the political stage in 2013 so enthralling. The EFF’s claim to represent the interests of the unemployed and working poor is dramatized by its leaders wearing workmen’s overalls and domestic worker uniforms to parliament, in what Achille Mbembe (2014) has described as ‘simulating identification with the proletariat.’

Yet for all its radical rhetoric the EFF’s vision, much like the ANC-government, remains wedded to the idea of employment as the basis of social inclusion and progress (Barchiesi 2011). The memorandum of demands the EFF handed over to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange at the end of the ‘Economic Freedom March’ in October 2015 is indicative of this orientation. The list of demands includes the nationalisation of the mines, greater state intervention in the reserve bank, the banning of labour brokers, a halt on retrenchments in the mining sector, and the implementation of a national minimum wage. None of these demands are new. Most are in fact ANC policy, or demands that the Communist Party or trade unions have been advocating for years. The EFF’s demands are all work-centred and thus reinforce the idea that wage labour is the only solution to unemployment. As Franco Barchiesi (2011) has pointed out, the ‘normative fixation’ on wage work highlights the contradiction of work as it is imagined – as a source of inclusion, dignity and social security – and the reality of work’s increasing precariousness and unavailability. In these neoliberal times there is an anachronistic dimension to the EFF’s vision, a

failure to recognise that wealth is increasingly abstracted from production and labour (J. L. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; J. Comaroff and Comaroff 2002) and thus harder to regulate and redistribute. The EFF's continued emphasis on job-creation rather than a call for more direct forms of distribution, such as a universal basic income grant, for example, demonstrate 'the continued political power of a nostalgically productivist vision' (Ferguson 2015, 200).

My interlocutors believe that the state should continue to play a critical role in the betterment of their lives through the creation of jobs and the provision of housing. But while urban youth feel entitled to their 'rightful share' of state wealth (Ferguson, 2015) they believe this should come through work or entrepreneurship rather than direct distribution (Dawson and Fouksman 2018). Moreover, this sense of entitlement exists alongside a wide disenchantment with democracy and a deep cynicism about politics. This was made clear to me in my discussions with my interlocutors in the days following Malema's speech in Zandspruit. One woman told me Malema was just a 'talk-shop' who would do little to change the realities of the poor he claims to champion. Others characterised Malema as identical to all politicians, who are 'liars' and cannot keep their promises. Eric told me Malema was a 'stand-up comedian' while Tebogo described South African politics as a 'comedy' that cannot be taken seriously.

Young men's political demands and expectations are in tension with their doubts about the state's ability or commitment to provide land, housing, and jobs. What I observed in Zandspruit was a growing emphasis on a do-it-

yourself attitude that stems from impatience amongst those who have been waiting for the state to deliver. This do-it-yourself attitude is expressed in various forms. It can be seen in the ongoing land occupations on the fringes of the settlement, the construction and expansion of an informal electricity market, but also in the anticipation and rewards associated with ‘being your own boss’.

Paradoxically, this do-it-yourself attitude is also reflected in the ANC’s growing emphasis on entrepreneurship and insistence that self-employment is a mechanism for upward mobility. In Chapter Three I suggested the appeal of being one’s own boss should be understood in relation to the government’s increasing emphasis on entrepreneurship and its re-framing of informal livelihoods as a generator of jobs and mode of inclusion and hope. This was especially evident in the Gauteng provincial government’s Modernization and Revitalization Strategy, which explicitly aims to draw the informal economy into the mainstream. It can also be read as a strategy to optimistically view the informal economy through the neoliberal lens of entrepreneurship (Barchiesi 2012b, 246). At the same time, I have demonstrated that the appeal of the entrepreneurial discourse, much like the search for livelihoods outside the wage relation, are not simply the manifestation of a neoliberal logic of self-reliance. It is a pragmatic response to the failure of the economy and state to provide ‘proper’ jobs. The appeal of this do-it-yourself attitude is also a reflection of a desire for autonomy from the capitalist economy and an aspiration to ownership and wealth.

In drawing attention to the productivity of unemployment, this thesis offers a challenge to the prevailing idea in South African social policy that ‘any job’ must always be better than no job at all. Young men’s rejection of the wage relation in favour of alternative modes of socioeconomic life suggests that we need to reconsider the value of low-wage work as a solution to unemployment in South Africa. It also reflects the reality that the unemployed and precariously employed are all too often denied a voice in public debates and discussions that are dominated by academics, big business, government, and trade unions that only represent a small fraction of the workforce.

A key thrust of this thesis is a critique of the preconceptions and prejudices that shape the framing of unemployment as a ‘problem’ or a ‘crisis’. This framing too often implies a telos that sees job creation as the only solution to unemployment (Ferguson and Li 2018). The problem with the uncritical embrace of job creation and entrepreneurship (as seen recently in President Ramaposa’s job summit) is three-fold. First, wage labour is simply no longer a possible way for *all* to access resources and livelihoods (Ferguson and Li 2018). Second, idealizing work obscures the exploitation and structural inequalities of the labour market and the forms of contestation that surround them. Third, the central place and moral status of (wage) work in mainstream social policies and political visions for the future precludes other ideas and policies that might allow for a more equal distribution of resources, and more plural, inclusive and imaginative visions for the ‘possibilities of life’ (Mbembe 2011). This includes, but is not limited to, the appeal of livelihoods outside of the wage relation, conceptions of

dignified life autonomous from wage work, and more radical forms of redistribution (Barchiesi 2012b; Weeks 2011).

While it is clear that job creation is not a real solution to the extreme levels of poverty and joblessness in South Africa, the challenge is made more complex when one considers the wider social imaginary and order that wage work has for a long time sustained. The impact of economic redundancy is about much more than income and poverty, it is about human possibility and sociality in the very widest sense. This challenge is further complicated by the historical injustices in South Africa. The problem is not just of economic participation but also one of equality and justice. It is a challenge that is both profoundly moral and political. Its moral dimension relates to the question of how we resolve or right historical injustice and inequalities in an era of superfluity (Mbembe 2011). Its political dimension is concerned with how the state manages and responds to the expectations and political demands of the economically disenfranchised outside the paradigm of labour.

The various chapters in this thesis offer insight into the ways in which unemployment is actively shaping the form and texture of economic life, gender and family relations, and what is demanded and expected in the public and political realm in contemporary South Africa. By documenting how work is refused, this thesis makes the case for re-thinking the normative centrality of wage work in academic scholarship, as well as in our social policies and political visions of economic redress and emancipation. This project thus attempts to renew an 'ethics of possibility' (Appadurai 2013) by

stimulating new discussions about work and the politics of distribution in South Africa – and beyond.

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